

Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon:

My Trusted **Companions** Tried to **Kill** Me, But Thanks to the **Gift** of an

UNLIMITED GACHA

I Got **LVL 9999**

Friends and Am Out For **Revenge**

on My **Former** Party Members

and the **World**



Story
Meikyou Shisui
Illustration
tef

VOL.

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**“SSSR Ultimate Sticky Web—
release!”**

The card transformed into
something akin to a spider’s web
that covered the Stone Golems
over a wide area.



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"Prometheus!
Bend my reality!"

This incantation caused the
Prometheus broadsword to manipulate
reality and split Nazuna into
five copies of herself.



"Well, well, well.
It appears that I have
finally brought you out
into the open."

A young man wearing a bandanna
materialized out of the darkness,
his squinting eyes seemingly
locked on me.

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Prologue: The Forbidden Sword

Sometime after the Concord of the Tribes had left Light for dead in the Abyss, Naano the dwarf quit his subsequent job and eventually wound up buying a mansion just outside of the Dwarf Kingdom capital, where he could focus all of his efforts toward fulfilling his lifelong dream. Though it should be noted that the building wasn't *quite* what one might envision a mansion to look like, for the two-story manor was enclosed by a stone fence with a metal gate marking the entrance, the sprawling lawn wasn't particularly well tended, and the builders appeared to have prioritized the structure's sturdiness rather than its elegance, as there was very little in the way of adornments to be seen. In short, Naano's estate looked more like a small fortress than a stately mansion.

Naano had paid for the place using the reward money he had been given for getting rid of Light after the powers that be had determined he wasn't a Master, and since the mansion had originally been built for blacksmith research to be carried out inside it, it fit in perfectly with Naano's own goal. As such, the first floor boasted a smithing workshop, while the basement housed a research lab specifically designed to prevent any secrets from slipping out.

A human merchant approached the entrance to the mansion and rapped on the door using the large knocker that hung down at face level. "Salutations, Mr. Naano," the merchant called out. "It is I, Cavaur."

Cavaur had arrived in a cloth-covered carriage filled with his wares. He was 170 centimeters tall, had a slender build, and wore the kind of clothing that would be considered commonplace wherever he went. Cavaur usually walked around with a leather satchel slung over his shoulder, but on this particular occasion, he had left it in the carriage. Overall, Cavaur had no striking features that would set him out from the crowd, and the only characteristics of his that were even worth mentioning were the bandanna covering his forehead, the smile he wore like a mask, and his permasquint.

A few moments later, the owner of the house responded to the knocking by opening the door partway. Even though the sun was high in the sky, the interior of the house was so dark, it was safe to assume that all the curtains were closed and no lights were on. Yet in the darkness, Naano's eyes twinkled like a couple of candles.

“Ah, Cavaur. Got the goods?” Naano asked.

“Naturally, kind sir,” Cavaur replied, an inauthentic smile on his face. “I come here today with everything you have requested for the occasion.”

“Take ‘em round the back,” Naano said, directing Cavaur to bring his carriage around the side of the manor to the delivery entrance at the rear. The merchant did as instructed with the ease of someone who had made this exact same maneuver dozens of times previously. Once he had reparked his carriage, Cavaur produced a notepad from his front pocket and recited Naano’s shopping list.

“I have brought the food, alcohol, daily supplies, and consumables you requested, along with the ironstone, coal, and alchemy materials of various types,” Cavaur listed. “In addition, I have once again procured for you the special orders that are stored in these three barrels, though I fear I will need help carrying them inside, due to their weight.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll lend you a hand with it all,” Naano muttered. “For corn’s sake, you humans are softer’n all hell. But I’ll carry in those barrels, since they contain precious goods. No need to bother yourself with ‘em.”

“Why, thank you very much, kind sir,” Cavaur said, his expression growing even more ingratiating.

Naano responded with an exasperated snort, then got to work lifting the large barrels. Since Naano’s power level was north of 300, hefting a barrel proved to be a fairly simple task for him. Cavaur busied himself by bringing in all the other goods, and with both men pitching in, the unloading process didn’t take long at all. Once everything was inside, the pair stood and faced each other in the mansion’s storeroom to wrap up the transaction.

“As ever, you may pay my fee through the account you maintain at the Adventurers’ Guild, Mr. Naano,” Cavaur stated.

“Consider it all paid up. Here,” Naano said, handing Cavaur a voucher with a number on it, the idea being that Cavaur would show this voucher to the guild at a later date to collect the money he was owed.

Cavaur folded the voucher and carefully slid it into his front pocket. “Am I to assume that your project is proceeding well? If you require any more materials, I am sure I can be of further service to you.”

“It’s going just peachy,” said Naano. “Might even say swimmingly. Here, take a gander at this beaut!”

With a toothy, manic grin, Naano drew the knife that was tucked into his belt and waved it around within inches of his supplier’s nose. There was a faint crimson tinge to the blade, and if one were to

squint, it was just possible to make out a fine, dark haze coming from the knife.

“This li’l gem’s a test piece I forged to see what that Book of Forbidden Weapons you sold me can do,” Naano stated. “All I had to do was follow the instructions, and I was able to forge this relic-class knife!” Naano tittered like a mischievous little boy. “See how amazingly it turned out?”

“Indeed. It is an incredible creation,” said Cavaur, whose pasted-on smile didn’t flinch even when Naano was pointing the eerie knife directly at his face. “In fact, I love it so much, I hope I might be able to purchase it from you to sell at a markup!”

Usually found in ruins, forbidden weapons were rare but powerful implements of war that cursed their wielders with shorter life spans, madness, or a range of other ailments. Some forbidden weapons were even imbued with black magic and made the wielders spill the blood of innocents. According to legend, a hero with sufficient mental fortitude would be able to withstand the kind of damage a forbidden weapon could inflict and use it without problems, but they were too dangerous for ordinary folk to even touch. For that reason, these weapons were also known as “cursed weapons” or “weapons of the Undergod.”

The nine nations had signed an accord that prohibited the ownership of such weapons, which meant that anyone who unknowingly possessed a forbidden weapon would be ordered to relinquish the implement immediately, while those caught knowingly possessing one faced the death penalty. Naano had bought a book filled with instructions on how to make these prohibited weapons, and had already followed its instructions to craft this prototype he was presently showing to Cavaur. On hearing the merchant’s validating response, the dwarf grew ebullient.

“You like it that much, huh?” Naano mused. “Not surprising. Even a lowly human like you can see what a masterpiece this thing is. Just proves what a virtuoso I am at smithing weaponry. I swear, the Goddess herself has sent me into this world to be the dwarf that crafts the ultimate legendary weapon.”

While Naano was busy self-eulogizing, intoxicated on his own pride, one of the barrels started to clatter and shake. The dwarf held the barrel still, while Cavaur scratched the back of his head apologetically.

“It appears the drug has worn off a tad too soon. Please forgive me, Mr. Naano,” said Cavaur.

Ignoring the merchant, Naano levered open the lid of the barrel and peered into it. Inside the wooden container was a human female whose hands and feet were in restraints, and who had been gagged for

good measure.

The Book of Forbidden Weapons listed formulas on how to create powerful weapons using black magic, and live humans were one of the main ingredients in the process. It went without saying that this was starting to wear away at Naano's mental health, but to the dwarf, it was a small price to pay for the opportunity to achieve his long-held dream of crafting the ultimate legendary weapon. In fact, Naano was rather enjoying the invigorating experience of slowly going insane. He treated the captured woman in the barrel to one of his crazed grins.

"I like this human's spunk. I can make a perfect weapon out of her, I just know it," Naano declared before addressing the woman directly. "You and the rest of you animals should consider yourselves lucky. You get to be reborn as a legendary weapon that'll be talked about for eons! Rejoice and thank me, humans! As a master blacksmith, I'll use your heart, bones, skin, pain, bitterness, madness, and anger, plus every single drop of blood in your bodies to make the greatest damned weapon that has ever been!"

As soon as Naano had finished his ranting, a loud, muffled scream erupted from the woman's gagged mouth and she struggled frantically to free herself, tears streaming down her face. Unfortunately for her, though, her limbs had been expertly restrained, meaning the most she could do was shake her head from side to side in a pointless display of nonacceptance at the gory fate that awaited her.

Naano refixed the lid, then lifted up the barrel, seemingly intending to take the load down to the basement laboratory. "Looks like I'm gonna be busy with these things. Anyway, keep these special orders coming, Cavaur. You know I always run out of 'em."

"As you wish, Mr. Naano," Cavaur replied. "You may leave everything to me."

Maintaining his smile and composure despite knowing that his fellow humans were being treated so unimaginably cruelly, Cavaur strolled out of the storage room, climbed back into the driver's seat of his carriage, and headed out onto the road again. When he was a good distance away, he slowly opened one of his squinting eyes and gave the mansion he'd just left a sidelong look.

"It seems they have yet to make a move," Cavaur mumbled to himself. "Or perhaps they have already made their move and I have yet to notice? If that is the case, they will prove troublesome opponents indeed. And I do not care for trouble."

But Cavaur's cryptic words couldn't be heard over the sound of the horses' hooves on the road as the carriage disappeared toward the horizon.



Chapter 1: Naano's Dream

The Dwarf Kingdom was an extremely mountainous nation, and while there was very little in the way of arable land to be found there, the terrain had blessed the dwarves with a wealth of natural resources they could mine. In combination with their technological prowess, this had made the dwarves a major exporter of a wide variety of goods. The Dwarf Kingdom was located on the west side of the continent, with the Dragonute Empire to the north and the Elven Queendom to the south, both borders demarcated by forbidding mountain ranges. The kingdom also looked out upon the Onifolk Archipelago that dotted the western sea, while due east lay the Human Kingdom, a nation with whom bilateral relations were neither positive nor negative.

A number of weeks before barrels of humans were delivered to the mansion he didn't yet own, Naano was sitting at a counter at the rear of a saloon in the Dwarf Kingdom's royal capital and drinking beer in a decidedly world-weary manner. He was stout and his limbs were short, yet in spite of his diminutive stature, he had quite a burly, muscular build. Like most dwarves, Naano looked more like a miniature man-mountain than some pint-size pushover. A white beard completely engulfed his mouth, which only added to this quintessential image of a dwarf. The saloon was mostly filled with dwarves chatting together with friends after work, but while Naano was also partaking in an after-work drink, he felt no sense of liberation from his job being over for the day, nor any joy at the guzzling of alcohol. In contrast to the general merriment around him, Naano gave off the dark vibes of a man loaded with debt from bad investments and with no hope for the future.

Naano sighed as he took another long swig from his wooden beer stein. Despite his air, Naano didn't have a single debt to his name. In fact, he had enough money to live high on the hog for the rest of his life. He had also been appointed to work at one of the top blacksmiths in the Dwarf Kingdom, so to any unbiased observer, Naano had made an enviable success of his life. Yet he continued to quaff beer in a way that suggested he was trying to drown his sorrows.

Every day, I hafta drag my withered old hump outta bed to go to that boring old job, thought Naano. Am I really gonna go to my grave without forging the legendary weapon of my dreams?

Orphaned at a young age, Naano grew up in an orphanage in a provincial city, where he would entertain himself by reading tales of heroic deeds. His favorite stories involved heroes who wielded legendary swords, spears, or bows, and he would read these tales over and over without ever tiring of them. However, young Naano didn't aspire to become a hero, like the ones depicted in these particular sagas. No, he wanted to be the one who crafted the legendary weapons. The weapons that especially piqued his fancy were the ones that appeared in the tale *The Magnificent Four and the Dark Lord*.

The Wind Armor and the Holy Talisman were more like magic items, Naano mused. The Volcano Lance was more my kind of weapon, since it packed the power of a volcanic eruption. But the real apple of my eye was the Zeta Sword.

According to the tale, which was the oldest epic recorded, the Goddess blessed four heroes with these four sacred weapons. The champions then banded together with a saintly maiden and set off on a journey to defeat the Dark Lord. Out of the four weapons they wielded, Naano loved the Zeta Sword the most, and it was his dream to forge a legendary weapon just like the Zeta Sword.

When Naano grew too old to remain at the orphanage, he decided to pursue his dream by taking a job at a blacksmith. His natural ability for crafting weapons drew endless praise from his boss, as well as from both senior and junior work colleagues. He forged an ideal life for himself, but even as he did so, the dwarf realized it was leading him into a dead end.

My dream will only ever stay a dream with the way things are going, Naano had thought at the time. Like this, I won't get to craft a legendary weapon!

Even though Naano had a knack for making weapons, he only possessed the knowledge and the aptitude to craft armaments that could be found in any regular armory. His talents were nowhere near what they needed to be to bring a legendary weapon into existence. On coming to this realization, Naano the blacksmith took up a side gig as an adventurer. Whenever he had free time from his day job, he would strike out at the break of dawn and explore a dungeon or some ancient ruin. Naano planned to squirrel away all the money he earned from these quests so that, in time, he would be able to open his own blacksmith, with the added bonus that any magic weapons he found while on these quests could be analyzed and used as reference toward eventually creating his dream weapon.

Naano's boss and his associates tried to talk him out of the adventuring life, telling him that he had a bright future ahead of him as the presumptive next chief of the blacksmith, and he didn't need to go earning extra money by crawling through dangerous dungeons and

ruins. While Naano still refused to give up on his dream, he attempted to silence the doubters by working harder and forging blades and armor that were more flawless than any of his colleagues could produce. He continued to explore dungeons on his days off, which still made everyone he knew look at him like he'd gone mad, but he didn't pay any attention to the whispers, and the feeling of getting closer to his goal of crafting a legendary weapon overrode any exhaustion he might have felt from his extra work questing. On multiple occasions, Naano nearly lost his life while out on quests, but he considered these experiences thrilling, and in truth, they made him feel more alive. All in all, he was leading a satisfying life, and he didn't give a fig what anyone else thought of him.

Naano's exploits soon reached the ears of the Dwarf Kingdom's authorities, and the top brass sent a messenger to dangle an offer he couldn't refuse in front of him.

"You're trying to find a Master?" Naano said.

"Yes, indeed," the emissary replied. "Would you care to take part in our project?"

The eight nonhuman nations had a long history of colluding together to assemble teams of investigators to search for potential Masters, and whenever one of these parties discovered a candidate, they would run background checks on the prospect and report their findings. Dwarves, however, tended to be completely committed to whatever line of work they chose to go into, whether that be as tradesmen or adventurers. Because dwarves would much rather devote their time toward perfecting their crafts than going off on a manhunt for Masters, the Dwarf Kingdom routinely had difficulties finding any willing takers for the task. However, the kingdom knew they couldn't just send some unqualified recruit to take part in this top secret, cross-national project, so when they heard about Naano who was both a skilled blacksmith *and* an adventurer, the higher-ups believed the dwarf would be interested in the mission.

"This assignment will require years of commitment, but even if you fail in your task, you will be rewarded handsomely," the messenger explained. "Of course, if you succeed, the rewards will be much greater. So what do you say? Not a bad deal, hm?"

The messenger pushed a piece of paper toward Naano with the amount of reward money and special privileges the dwarf could expect for taking part in this top secret assignment. The monetary figure was certainly eye-popping, but the part that truly inspired Naano was the chance to learn about Masters.

If I find one of these "Masters," I might finally get a few ideas and pick up some know-how on how to craft a legendary weapon! Naano thought. The more the dwarf heard about these Masters and the breadth of the

powers, skills, weapons, and knowledge they possessed, the more intrigued he became with them. By the end of the meeting, Naano was fully on board with joining the Concord of the Tribes.

Just a few years later, the party came across a candidate to be a Master, but this boy called Light turned out to be a dud. The Concord's superiors ordered them to end his life, so the party took Light to the Abyss to assassinate him. But Light managed to trigger a teleportation trap before the final blow landed, and the Concord was subsequently unable to find any trace of the young boy in the dungeon. The party members all agreed there was practically no hope that Light could survive in the deeper levels of the world's deadliest dungeon, plus his chance of survival was even slimmer as he was seriously injured.

When the top brass received the party's final report, they agreed with its findings that Light was as good as dead and rewarded the members of the Concord for successfully assassinating the human boy. Naano initially refused the sizable reward money he was offered, instead asking to be put on the next hunt for a Master, but the higher-ups refused his request. Reappointing investigators in that way would have risked tipping off yet-undiscovered Masters to the existence of this clandestine project, so member nations had agreed beforehand that they would limit investigators to just the one mission. The brass ultimately forced Naano to accept his reward money, which was enough for him to retire on the spot if he'd wanted, but in addition to this honorarium, Naano accepted a position at one of the Dwarf Kingdom's leading blacksmiths.

Naano instantly became the envy of every aspiring dwarf blacksmith, but this outcome had placed him further away from his dream. Naano briefly considered using the reward money to finance his own Master manhunt, but that would have gone against the conditions of participating in the original mission, and the penalty for violating that contractual provision was death, sanctioned by the Dwarf Kingdom and the other races. Plus, even if Naano had been free to search for a Master, the biggest problem he would face was where to actually find one. It had mostly been down to dumb luck that the Concord of the Tribes had found Light, and similar missions had previously gone on for decades—and no doubt, would again—without finding any potential Masters. Naano conducting a solo search for a Master would be akin to a treasure hunter looking for a flake of gold in the middle of a desert.

Of course, Naano could simply go back to combing through dungeons and ruins for magic weapons that might provide clues on how to go about forging a legendary weapon, but compared to the shortcut an encounter with a Master would likely offer, resorting to

that trial-and-error approach again would be nothing less than torture to him.

I was this close to achieving my dream, just to have it snatched away from me, Naano thought, staring glumly into space in the saloon. With no other realistic path available to him toward attaining his long-held ambition, it looked as though he was doomed to live out the rest of his days with no purpose or joy in life.

S'all because of that sonuvabitch brat, Light! Naano cursed in his mind. If we hadn't found that blasted phony, I'd still be hunting for a real Master with my kingdom's backing! That utter louse! I hope that little shitbird inferior died a slow painful death in the Abyss for all the pain and misery he's caused me!

Naano peered despondently into his stein, which was now empty. *How the hell am I supposed to find a Master now? I'd sell my soul to the Dark Lord himself for a chance to meet one and realize my dream.*

"Mr. Naano, is it?" a voice said behind him, seemingly in answer to his thoughts. "Might I have a moment of your time? I promise you will find this conversation of value to you."

Naano turned and glared at the speaker. Standing before him was a fairly nondescript human whose grin was so forced, his cheek muscles were basically keeping his eyes squeezed shut. Aside from his broad, salesman-like smile, the only other thing worth noting about the man was the leather satchel that was slung over his shoulder and the bandanna he wore under his bangs.

Seemingly oblivious to the nasty scowl Naano was treating him to, the man took a seat beside the dwarf. Because the saloon mainly served dwarves, the counter and the seats were built rather low to accommodate their usual clientele, so the man had to contort himself somewhat to sit down, as if he were squeezing in at the kiddie table.

"Greetings, kind sir," the man said. "I am a weapons merchant by the name of Cavaur. It is a real pleasure to meet you."

Naano clicked his tongue in annoyance. *Great. Just what I need: a damn headache on top of my misery.*

Ninety percent of the Human Kingdom were peasant farmers, while the rest were either adventurers, merchants, or slaves. Being a merchant was the third most common voluntary occupation among humans, since it was the most accessible option for those who wished to do something other than work on a farm but didn't have the necessary brawn to be an adventurer. But being a merchant—especially a traveling one—was still quite a perilous job, since merchants ran the risk of being set upon by bandits and monsters as soon as they left the safety of their own village, and those odds only multiplied outside of the Human Kingdom. Hiring armed escorts was an expensive prospect for a trade where profits weren't guaranteed,

and since these merchants were powerless humans, customers from other races often strong-armed them into agreeing sales that left them in the red.

What all of this basically boiled down to was that human merchants found themselves at a disadvantage compared to merchants from other races, which was why so many gravitated toward selling mostly dwarf-made goods, because not only were their products high-quality, but dwarves also expressed less bigotry toward humans compared to the other races. Of course, individual dwarves had varying levels of antihuman bias, and it wasn't hard to find dwarves who practiced more extreme forms of unmitigated hatred toward humans, but by and large, the dwarf race espoused a "live and let live" attitude when it came to humans. In other words, dwarves were so busy mastering their own trades, they didn't have time to actively discriminate against another race. In fact, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that dwarves simply didn't really care about humans one way or the other, instead of invidiously looking down on them. It is oft repeated that the opposite of love is not hate but indifference, but for humans, this sentiment was far more preferable than the pernicious bigotry they endured from the other races.

If any human merchant approached a dwarf customer, it was often for one of two reasons. One type of merchant would try to engage in unsolicited sales in order to make connections with dwarf artisans that might provide them with high-quality goods to sell later down the line, while the other variety simply sought to sell their own, nondwarf products.

"Normally, I would be carrying dwarf goods, but this evening, I am here to provide you with a noteworthy item that you have long coveted," Cavaur told Naano, his smile fixed.

The dwarf clicked his tongue again as he thought back to the time when he was still working two jobs as a blacksmith and an adventurer. Naano had gained notoriety for pursuing what people viewed as a quixotic dream, and this led to a bunch of merchants showing up and offering him clearly junk products while claiming that they would help him to forge the legendary weapon he wished to craft. Though on top of being a blacksmith, it should be noted that Naano had studied magic weapons for years, and his knowledge of them rivaled that of any expert. This fact, however, didn't stop a litany of flimflam artists from viewing Naano as an eccentric and an easy mark for their junk items. This encounter fit the same pattern as those ones, so it was perhaps no surprise that Naano regarded Cavaur with such hostility.

"Don't want it. Beat it," Naano said curtly.

"I can assure you, Mr. Naano, that you will greatly appreciate

what I have to offer,” Cavaur said, undeterred.

“I just said I don’t want whatever it is you’re selling!” Naano yelled at the merchant. “Now scram before I permanently disfigure that chuckleheaded grin of yours!”

The merchant flinched and turned pale at this threat from the Level 300 dwarf, but unlike the previous merchants who would have taken the hint and moved on at this point, Cavaur strangely stood his ground.

“I-I assure you, I mean you no harm, Mr. Naano,” he stuttered. “I do truly come with an item I feel you will be most interested in.”

The merchant opened his satchel and showed Naano what was inside: a thick tome that gave off an aura that caused Naano’s irritation to instantly transform into wild astonishment. The dwarf gulped, then quickly motioned to Cavaur to close his satchel up again. Some of the saloon’s patrons who were drinking nearby quizzically eyed the pair, seemingly attempting to gauge whether or not they were about to start a bar brawl. Naano ignored the curious onlookers, paid his tab, and nodded to Cavaur to indicate that they should conduct their business elsewhere.

The two walked out of the saloon and made their way to the single-room apartment in the communal bachelor dwelling where Naano was living at the time. Even though Naano had plenty of money to buy himself a residence that better reflected his actual wealth, he chose to rent this place instead, since it was close to the elite blacksmith where he worked. Similar to the saloon, the building had been constructed with dwarves in mind, so Cavaur had to stoop to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling, but despite this, the merchant was all smiles as he followed Naano into his dwelling, which contained similarly undersized furnishings. Naano locked the door, rattled the handle to make sure it was secure, then strode back over to Cavaur, who was standing in the center of the room.

“Have you gone nutso?” said Naano. “Why would you show me that”—he was momentarily lost for words—“that *thing* in the middle of a full bar!”

“If you truly objected to my actions, I imagine you would have escorted me to the sentinels instead of your home,” Cavaur said. “I believe this shows that you are indeed interested in the Book of Forbidden Weapons that I have come to offer you.”

Knowingly owning forbidden weapons was a felony punishable by death, meaning such weapons were mostly the stuff of fairy tales, and hardly anyone was ever seen actually wielding one. Having a whole tome with instructions on how to craft forbidden weapons was naturally a capital crime in itself, yet Naano had brought this criminal into his home, which basically made him a coconspirator.

“Where’d ya get that confounded book, anyway?” Naano said, rooted to the spot. “Is it the real McCoy?”

Cavaur’s smile broadened, as if he were a gambler who had just won a bet. According to the merchant, he had been traveling along a road when he happened upon the corpse of an adventurer who appeared to have been attacked by a monster the moment he had exited some ruins or a dungeon. Cavaur had rummaged through the dead man’s effects to see if he had anything of value about his person that he might be able to sell, and it was then that he found the Book of Forbidden Weapons.

His story passes the smell test, at least, Naano thought to himself. The dwarf had heard accounts of adventurers leaving a dungeon or ruins after exhausting quests, only to succumb to surprise attacks by random monsters that they couldn’t fight off due to their fatigue. Still, whether the tome was the real deal or not was up for debate. Books recovered from ruins tended to either be written in fairly modern language or in an ancient tongue that needed deciphering, so Naano had no way of immediately ruling out Cavaur’s book as phony just by looking at the text.

“At first, I thought about selling the book on the black market,” Cavaur continued. “But I realized I would be risking being haggled down to a pittance, and in the worst-case scenario, I might even have been forced to hand over the book for nothing if threatened with being turned in to the authorities. I did not wish to simply get rid of the book, however. Quite the predicament, yes? But then I heard rumors about your good self and your endless struggle to craft a legendary weapon.”

Naano’s eyes narrowed as he regarded Cavaur, since the merchant was once again reminding him of the would-be swindlers who used to approach him. At the same time, it was an open secret that Naano had dedicated his life to crafting a legendary weapon, to the point where anyone asking around was bound to hear about him sooner or later.

“I also learned that you had struck it rich as an adventurer,” Cavaur noted. “Suffice to say, when I heard about you, I came to realize that a heavenly gift had been bestowed upon me by the Goddess, and it was a heavenly gift that I needed to share with you.”

Cavaur’s beaming smile widened. “As for me, I wish to run my own shop. However, the only humans who run stores are those who have saved up money over generations, those who have struck gold as adventurers, or those who have been lucky enough to find patrons willing to fund their business ventures. Alas, I am the first in my family to choose merchant as my vocation, I have never so much as been on a quest, and no one will loan me money to run a shop. So by all accounts, I will not be able to own a store through the legitimate

means available to me, but I shall do whatever needs to be done in order to realize my dream!”

Naano stood in silence as Cavaur persisted with his sales pitch. “I hope you now understand why I have risked death to bring this book to you, Mr. Naano. Owning a store is a lofty dream, and a human like myself will cross any dangerous bridge that presents itself to attain such a goal. And if you will pardon me for indulging in a spot of self-praise, I do believe the gamble I have taken in coming to you has borne fruit, judging by your current reaction.”

Cavaur’s observation was an astute one, for Naano did feel a twinge of excitement, even if his face wasn’t necessarily showing it. The sagas Naano had read as a kid contained powerful swords forged using black magic that heroes with strong mental fortitude wielded without being cursed themselves, and now this merchant had in his possession the very book that contained the formula for making such a legendary sword. In the past, Naano had even gone as far as considering striking out on his own to hunt for a Master in order to craft a mythic weapon of the kind he dreamed about. But right here, in this moment, Cavaur was offering Naano an alternative shortcut to his dream, even if the weapon he forged would inevitably be a manifestation of evil.

Even though Naano was having to exert no small amount of effort to contain his excitement, he decided he would conduct one last test on Cavaur to make sure the merchant wasn’t trying to pull a fast one. “You think I’m gonna fork over my hard-earned money for that? You realize I could just snuff you out right here, copy down what’s in the book, then toss your stinking cadaver with the original to the soldiers, thereby making me the hero who bagged a criminal.”

To show he wasn’t joking about how this was an option, Naano unleashed a murderous aura to bear down on the merchant, but despite the overwhelming pressure being exerted by the Level 300 dwarf, Cavaur stood his ground and responded without missing a beat.

“What I have on my person is only one-half of the book,” Cavaur stated. “The other half is locked away in a location that only I know about. If you kill me, the other half of the book will be forever lost to you and the world. You do, of course, have the option of torturing me, though it remains to be seen if you are adept enough to perform the task in this tiny abode without any of your neighbors hearing.”

Naano tutted again. “Thought of everything, ain’t ya? This is why I can’t stomach you slick-talking shitmongers.”

“I will take that as a compliment,” Cavaur said, bowing theatrically.

Naano hated to admit it, but the fact Cavaur hadn’t even flinched in the face of his very real threat proved the merchant really did

intend to sell the Book of Forbidden Weapons. *Guess he'll do whatever it takes to get his own shop, come hell or high water*, thought Naano. *That's the dream of every human merchant, I suppose.*

As soon as Cavaur lifted his head from his deep bow, he produced the Book of Forbidden Weapons from his satchel and presented it to Naano. The dwarf gruffly snatched the book from him, making sure to keep his excitement as bottled-up as he could manage.

"All right. I'll give you the money. Just make sure you bring the other half," Naano said.

"I would prefer us to sign a contract first," Cavaur replied. "Once you have prepared the entirety of the payment for me, as per my specifications, I will bring the rest of the book to you in short order."

Naano clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "You hucksters are nothing if not thorough. Fine. I'll find you again when I've got everything set up."

"Oh, you are so very generous, Mr. Naano!" Cavaur gushed. "Thank you very much, kind sir! Now I will get to run a shop of my very own!"

Naano and Cavaur discussed ways of contacting each other, as well as the best method for transferring such a large amount of money without drawing suspicion, then once the pair had signed duplicate contracts, Naano officially became the new owner of the Book of Forbidden Weapons. Or half of it, at least.

"And so ends our discussion regarding the sale of the book. However..." At this point, Cavaur's eyes crinkled even tighter as he pressed his palms together. "I would be happy to provide you with whatever goods and materials you might need to craft your weapons, Mr. Naano."

The dwarf harrumphed. "Fishing for some walking-around money now, are we?" he muttered, scoffing at his fellow colluder with a vague air of friendliness. "You peddlers are the biggest sharks alive, you know that?"

"Thank you very much, kind sir," Cavaur replied. "That is the greatest compliment you could pay a merchant."

Once Cavaur had exited the apartment, Naano was finally alone with the book. "I can't hunt for Masters no more, thanks to that little runt, Light, but it appears Lady Luck's decided to smile down on me for once." Naano started poring over the text, and the thought of sleep or food would be the furthest thing from his mind for quite some time to come.

Just outside the apartment, Cavaur the merchant swapped his manufactured smile out for a smirk that betrayed his true colors. It was not the kind of expression you would expect to find on the face of a simple if somewhat oily peddler who had just closed a sale after

gambling with his life. No, this was the sneer of a man who hadn't felt like he was in even an ounce of danger during his previous confrontation.

"I wonder if the Great Tower will take the bait," Cavaur muttered to no one in particular, and the words dissolved into the background tumult of the Dwarf Kingdom capital without reaching anyone else's ears.

Chapter 2: The Meeting

Back when Princess Lilith of the Human Kingdom visited the Great Tower with her royal delegation, I arranged for her to stay for further conversations with me, secretly switching her out with a UR Double Shadow clone so that the people of her kingdom would be none the wiser about her absence. In those conversations with Lilith, I managed to gain some valuable insights.

“Based on everything you’ve told me, Lord Light, we can easily get the Dwarf Kingdom on our side,” Lilith said during one of our talks.

“Do you have any basis for saying that, Princess Lilith?” I asked.

“Yes, of course,” Lilith replied cheerfully. “After all, dwarves are a race that care more about mastering a craft than anything else.”

According to the princess, most dwarves spent their days in the pursuit of making better swords, weaponry, magic items, and even kitchen utensils. There were also dwarves who sought to rebuild an advanced society of the type that had once existed long ago. However, the other nations had placed restrictions on how much the nine races could develop their technologies, pointing to the destruction of this past civilization as a reason for extreme caution. The dwarves found these arbitrary limits frustrating to no end, feeling it was like telling fish not to swim and birds not to fly.

“Officially, the dwarves abide by those rules because they don’t want to make enemies out of the other seven races,” Lilith explained. “After all, in the worst-case scenario, doing that might lead to the destruction of their race.”

“Okay, I get it now,” I said. “I guess anyone would choose to submit to that pressure as the lesser of two evils.”

“Yes, anyone sensible would make that same choice in their position,” Lilith said with a hint of passion in her voice. “The Human Kingdom has been forced to acquiesce to all kinds of shameful concessions, even to the point where we have to sell our own people as slaves. The dwarves have been the only race that has treated my nation with any semblance of decency.”

According to Lilith, she herself had once believed the dwarves forced child slaves to work in coal mines, but the dwarves had bluntly retorted that “coal mines weren’t playgrounds for children” and that they would never accept “rank amateurs” for that particular line of

work, so even though dwarves did purchase human slaves, they didn't force them to work in coal mines or other harsh environments like that. Human slaves largely performed housekeeping tasks and odd jobs for the dwarves, and it was for that reason that Lilith now believed the dwarves treated humans the most favorably out of all the eight nonhuman races.

"When I was younger, I attended a summit at the Principality of the Nine and had the opportunity to converse with the dwarf king," Lilith said, a wistful look on her face. "He told me again and again that he would much rather just abdicate so that he could concentrate on research and other such work, which completely floored me at the time."

To me, it made total sense that the dwarf king would say that, and it went a long way toward explaining why, as a whole, the dwarves didn't force human slaves to do all the dangerous work simply because they were slaves. No, if the dwarves really were only interested in furthering their own crafts, I guessed that meant the dwarves weren't concerned about *any* of the other races, let alone humans. Though just to be clear, dwarves weren't some monolith, and there were definitely a number of dwarves who looked down upon humans as "inferiors." But at least among dwarves who considered themselves craftsmen, the number who exhibited extreme prejudice toward the human race appeared to be vanishingly small, according to Lilith.

"So I believe the dwarves would be willing to listen to you on equal terms if you were to present them with rare minerals, weapons, or items," the princess added.

There's something in that. That receptionist at the Dwarf Kingdom's guild initially dismissed me as some random inferior when I first walked in to exchange loot, I thought, remembering back to my experiences during the first Operation Adventurer mission up on the surface world. But as soon as I started farming ice gems on a regular basis, her attitude toward my party did a complete one-eighty and we started getting the royal treatment.

In other words, that receptionist represented a typical dwarf whose engagement with others depended solely on whether the person in question could be of benefit to the dwarf's trade. For reference, according to Lilith, beastfolk instantly looked down on humans and the majority of them were actively hostile toward us. Centaurs had the same reaction as beastfolk, though the centaurs saw the beastfolk as rivals.

As I had already witnessed, elves were extremely bigoted toward humans, though their hatred seemed almost personal, which Lilith seemed to think was down to the fact that the elves were the race that—aside from the dark elves—most closely resembled humans. Dark

elves were equally as bigoted toward humans, but that hatred was secondary to their racial rivalry with the elves.

Onifolk, on the other hand, didn't just look down upon humans—they treated us like we didn't even exist. Onis were mostly private by nature and kept to themselves, and very few of them viewed the other races as adversaries. If they showed interest in anything, it was in improving themselves and their nation.

Demonkin treated humans like cattle and as a source of cheap labor, but if we were being totally honest, demons didn't even deem humans worth considering, instead reserving most of their antagonism for the dragonutes. Though even then, it appeared that hostilities between the two races weren't based on any kind of deep-seated hatred, suggesting the demonkin simply viewed dragonutes as rivals to beat.

As for the dragonutes, they considered themselves the superior of all nine races, and this attitude was on full display during international summits. However, it should be noted that the dragonutes' belief that they were the master race was more of a natural response rather than a posturing one, so they harbored no intentional antipathy toward the other races. The Dragonute Empire itself was a highly secretive regime, so not a whole lot was known about the humans who were sent to that nation.

Mei, who had been in the room during this conversation, later recalled what Lilith had told me about the dwarves when I was thinking about who to take revenge on next.

"The dwarves might be enticed over to our side without the need to go to war with them," Mei had said. I'd taken her suggestion to heart and decided to make contact with the Dwarf Kingdom in order to exact my vengeance on Naano.



At that moment in time, I was in my office in the bottom tier of the Abyss, discussing my next revenge plot with Mei. Aoyuki was busy monitoring the surroundings of the Abyss and the Great Tower using her mental link with her familiars, while Ellie was occupied with helping the former slaves to build a settlement around the tower. As for Nazuna, well, she had her hands full being a bodyguard-slash-playmate for my little sister, Yume.

Seated at my desk, I scanned the proposed game plan against Naano that Mei had written up. "I guess we shouldn't get the elves to broker a meeting between us and the Dwarf Kingdom on this one, like we did with the Human Kingdom's Great Tower tour."

"Correct, Master Light," Mei confirmed. "We employed the Elven Queendom to deliver an invitation to the Human Kingdom to send a

royal delegation to the Great Tower for the presumed purpose of inspecting the burgeoning settlement to confirm that their fellow humans were being treated humanely. However, it would be manifestly peculiar for dwarven royalty to make any sort of contact with the Great Tower in such an open manner. I am not clear on how we would even be able to portray such a meeting in a way that would be acceptable to the other nations.”

Mei paused for a moment. “In certain scenarios, it may be to our advantage to create a spectacle that would grab the world’s attention, but I believe such an approach would be somewhat counterproductive to our stated goals in this instance.”

“And the Dwarf Kingdom would be just as likely to refuse to meet us anyway, out of fear that it would give the dragonutes the wrong idea,” I said.

If you wanted to talk to someone, needlessly irritating them made little sense. Especially since taking revenge on all the members of the Concord of the Tribes wasn’t my only goal. I wanted to uncover the truth behind Masters, plus the reason for the assassination attempt on me, and since I didn’t know how much information the Dwarf Kingdom had on Masters, nor whether they were deeply involved in green-lighting my assassination, it seemed like it would be a misstep to engage in strong-arm tactics with the nation for the time being. There was also the identity of the mystery assailant who destroyed my village to consider, so all in all, I figured it was better to gather as much information as I could before throwing our weight around. Of course, we could always flatten the Dwarf Kingdom if it came to it, but even that would require some intelligence-gathering to pull off without a hitch.

“In that case, let’s go with your proposal of sending Nemumu to infiltrate the Dwarf Kingdom to offer the king an opportunity for us to meet in secret,” I said to Mei. “If the king does agree to a meeting with us, we can get some idea of how much he knows, and even ask him to cooperate with us behind the scenes, as long as his kingdom doesn’t have a history of abusing humans. If the king is willing to partner with us, that’d be perfect. If not, well, the dwarves will have just made a new enemy.”

“How *would* you engage the dwarves if you declared them the enemy?” Mei asked.

“Unfortunately for the dwarves, they’d suffer the same fate as the Elven Queendom and the Dark Elf Islands,” I said with a slight smirk. “We’d turn their kingdom into another secret puppet state, either by forcing the monarchy to submit or by replacing the leadership altogether. In short, whether we do it the easy way or the hard way, we’ll gain the Dwarf Kingdom’s cooperation.”

Realizing that this meant the very fate of the Dwarf Kingdom hung on the king's willingness to play ball, Mei's smile mirrored my own. "An astute observation, Master Light," she said.





The Dwarf Kingdom's castle was a giant citadel made out of stone from the surrounding mountains that had been carved and fashioned with the dwarves' meticulous engineering skills. The craftsmanship on the furnishings inside were of a similar quality, though just one glance was enough to reveal that those who'd made the furniture had only sought to outshine the other artisans with their own personal flair. As a result, the furnishings looked like a hodgepodge of out-of-place museum pieces that had been thrown together rather than objects that contributed harmoniously to the overall interior design of the castle. But while such an arrangement might seem curious to someone on the outside looking in, the master of the castle saw nothing odd about the decor and showed no sign of wanting to alter it. That person—King Dagan—entered his private chamber that evening after a full day of work, seeking to drink himself into a stupor before flopping into bed, like he always did.

“Blast it all to hellfire!” Dagan cursed. “I don't *want* to be king anymore! I wanna go back to doing *real* work and research! Why, oh why did I get chosen to be the ruler, anyway?!”

Dagan had a bald head and a thick beard, and like most dwarves, he was sturdily built despite his short stature. He grabbed the bottle of wine that had been placed on the table for him, then slumped down on a sofa and drank straight from the bottle. After his first rather long swig, he wiped his mouth in a slovenly manner that was far removed from how a typical monarch would usually comport themselves.

“Drat it all,” Dagan muttered, still holding the bottle by his side. “I'd give anything to go back in time so I could throw ‘rock’ instead of ‘paper.’ If I'd only picked ‘rock’ back then, I'd be neck-deep in some meaningful research right now!”

Although most people would have had no idea what Dagan was muttering about, choosing ‘paper’ had been the biggest mistake of his life. The reason for this stemmed from the fact that the Dwarf Kingdom wasn't ruled by royal dynasties like some of the other nations. Since the founding of the kingdom, the head dwarves of the workshops would gather in conclaves and foist the duties of being the monarch on a fellow elite. Dwarves weren't fond of forming legislative bodies to decide the laws of the land, because they believed such a process that was fraught with factionalism would be too cumbersome. No, the thinking went that it was much more efficient to have a monarch who would ultimately decide how the nation should be run. Of course, because the Dwarf Kingdom had been founded by master craftsmen who envisioned a nation that would manufacture the finest

goods, the kingdom did appoint a small number of ministers whose job it was to make sure that the nation maintained its product quality so that it would remain unrivaled by any of the other races. But due to the fact that dwarf tradespeople would have much rather focused all of their time on improving their craft, since antiquity, very few dwarves had been willing to take on the role of monarch, so it fell to the elite craftsmen to customarily compel one of their own to wear the crown.

Dagan came from a long line of magic-item developers and researchers, and he himself was a top tradesman in his own right. As a researcher of magic items, he was a genuine celebrity, whose name was known by practically every single dwarf in the kingdom. But during the last conclave that was held to decide the present monarch, the contenders were eventually narrowed down to Dagan and a master artisan whose family trade could similarly be traced all the way back to the founding of the kingdom. After hours of heated wrangling, the two finally decided to settle the debate over who should be king with a round of “rock paper scissors,” with the loser taking the throne. Dagan chose paper, while his opponent threw scissors, and that was that.

Dagan, who had rued that day ever since, emptied the wine bottle with another long swig and belched. “But my term as king ends when the next summit at the Duchy rolls around. Then I’ll be free to dive back into my work with magic items! All I have to do is bear with it until—”

“Dwarf king.”

Out of the blue, a female voice rang through Dagan’s private chamber, shocking the king into silence. The dwarf twisted his head in the direction of his bed, which seemed to be where the voice had come from, and a figure in a hooded cloak stepped out of the shadows.

“Are you an assassin?!” Dagan cried out, wielding the empty wine bottle in his right hand like a sword, throwing his left hand behind his back, and lowering his hips into a battle stance. Despite this threatening pose, the intruder showed no signs of panic.

“Dwarf king,” the infiltrator repeated in a detached manner. “It is no use raising your voice to summon the guards. Also, there is no point activating that magic item you keep on your belt. It will not work against me.”

Dagan flinched. The king had been fully expecting the guards stationed outside the chamber doors to come rushing in on hearing him yelling. Holding the wine bottle up, ready to attack with it, had been a ruse to distract the assailant while Dagan reached behind his back for the magic item that could form a magical barrier around

himself, shielding him from any possible attacks by the intruder, and therefore buy him time until the soldiers arrived on the scene. Yet no guards had come running to his aid, and the intruder's pronouncement that the magic item wouldn't work sounded convincing enough to make Dagan sweat bullets.

"First, I must apologize for approaching you at this hour in such a disrespectful manner. I don't intend to harm you in any way," the intruder said, attempting to reassure Dagan that he was in no danger. "I have come here to discuss an important matter with you."

"So you're *not* an assassin sent here by the dragonutes?" Dagan asked skeptically.

"Correct, I am not," the cloaked figure said. "I serve the highest lord, who wishes to know the truth."

"The truth, you say?"

"My lord seeks the truth about what Masters are and why a potential Master would need to be killed," the visitor said. "My lord also wishes to know if an entity exists whose power surpasses even that of a Master. Indeed, the one I serve seeks to know the answers to many more questions, and to find out the truth behind them, he wishes to conduct a highly confidential meeting with you, the king of the dwarves. My lord swears on his illustrious name that he will guarantee your safety, so we hope that you may spare him some of your time."

Dagan fell silent as the woman finished saying her piece. Even though he'd never wanted the job, Dagan was still the king, and as a matter of course, he did know certain things about Masters. Dagan wasn't willing to breathe a word to a dubious character like the hooded woman in front of him, but he equally couldn't ignore the fact that she had infiltrated this highly fortified citadel, sneaked into his private chamber without drawing the attention of the guards, and successfully managed to evade every single one of the magical alarms and security devices that were the latest in dwarf technology. Dagan was face-to-face with an opponent who not only knew he carried a magical barrier item but had also declared that the shield it produced would be ineffective. If he were to refuse her request, she might very well end up killing him, then effortlessly escape from the royal citadel without being captured. Faced with two equally unsavory options, Dagan remained silent as he gazed upon his opponent: the Assassin's Blade, Nemumu.

For her, infiltrating this citadel filled with the kingdom's most experienced guards and the latest in dwarf-tech security had been as easy as strolling into the next room of a house. After all, Nemumu wasn't a UR Level 5000 assassin for nothing, and if she'd really wanted to, she could have killed Dagan on the spot. However, Light

had expressly ordered Nemumu not to assassinate Dagan, even if he refused the request put to him. In that scenario, Nemumu would simply leave the castle without another word, and a day later, the “Wicked Witch of the Tower” would pay the Dwarf Kingdom a visit and pound the nation into submission. At the same time, Lilith had advised Light to approach the dwarf king with a sweetener to catch his ear. Nemumu reached into her cloak—slowly, so that Dagan could see she wasn’t pulling out a weapon to kill him—and produced a box, which she subsequently opened.

“If you accommodate my lord’s request for a meeting, he is willing to offer you this phantasma-class Poison Immunity Ring for your troubles,” Nemumu stated.

“Is that seriously a *phantasma*-class item?!” Dagan practically shouted. As Lilith had said, the king was crazy about magic items, and dangling such a powerful object in front of him was indeed proving to be the ultimate enticement. Dagan threw all caution to the wind and ran over to Nemumu’s outstretched hand like a dog wanting a treat.

“Lemme see it!” Dagan said excitedly. “I wanna feel it! Lemme lick it!”

“Y-You can have it if you agree to speak with my lord. After that, you can do whatever you like with it,” stuttered a clearly flustered Nemumu.

“You mean I just have to *speak* with him? Fine! You got it!” Dagan exclaimed. “Just tell me when, where, and how, so I can have this ring!”

It was Nemumu’s turn to be stunned into silence by Dagan’s complete change in attitude. *Will I regret bringing this type of person to meet Lord Light?* she thought. All the while, Dagan’s eyes were glued to the ring, his face glowing like a little boy staring longingly at a shiny new toy. At the very least, Nemumu felt reassured that the dwarf king was totally on board with meeting Light in secret.



“Welcome to my abode, Dwarf King Dagan,” I said to my guest. “Thank you for making the trip to see me. I apologize for arranging this meeting under these circumstances. As for me, well...” I paused. “For now, you can call me Mr. Nobody.”

“Oh, it was barely a trip at all, what with how you used that teleportation item to whisk me here from my room!” Dagan marveled. “So I have to ask: where’d you find that teleportation item? In some ruins? Or a dungeon? If you have another, would you mind selling it to me so that I can use it for my research? Or if you can’t sell one to me, could I at least see it and feel it? Just a quick touch is all I ask! Or let me smell it, at the very least!”



Nemumu had brought Dagan to a guest parlor on the top floor of the Great Tower. I was wearing the SSR Faceveil Hood, which was the same thing Ellie wore whenever she had to play the part of the tower witch. Mei was in the room too, acting as my servant and bodyguard, and she was also wearing a mask. I stared wordlessly at Dagan as he completely ignored my remark about being called “Mr. Nobody” and proceeded to ask me a torrent of questions about the SSR Teleportation card.

I never imagined he'd be this crazy about magical items, I thought, astonished and a little revulsed by his reaction. Instead of answering Dagan's quick-fire questions, I gestured for him to take a seat.

“I'm sorry, but I prefer not to let anyone outside of my circle have access to my teleportation items,” I said.

“Yeah, I expect you wouldn't,” Dagan sighed. “They are extremely rare, and I shouldn't have asked for the impossible. I tend to lose sight of such things whenever I glimpse a powerful magic item.”

Dagan was much quicker to back off when told no than I was expecting, given his rabid enthusiasm for the item in question. As Lilith had told me in advance, the impression Dagan gave off was one of a working man more than of royalty. She'd also told me that the other master craftsmen had pretty much forced him into being king, which was simply unheard of in any other nation.

Dagan and I sat down at opposite ends of a table, with Mei pulling a chair out for me, while Nemumu pulled out Dagan's chair. Mei then brought tea for the two of us before stepping back out of the way to allow us to begin our talk.

“Once again, I apologize for bringing you here at such short notice,” I said. “Thank you for answering my request to have a meeting and for coming all this way to accommodate me. There are quite a number of things I need to ask you, so I'm glad you were willing to spare some of your time.”

I treated Dagan like a normal guest, without applying any pressure on him or acting like I outranked him. For his part, Dagan silently raised a hand to thank Mei for the tea before bringing the cup up to his lips, holding it by the rim instead of the handle. It was as if I had invited an eccentric, middle-aged uncle for a visit instead of a monarch.

“Like I said, it was no trouble. Not with that teleportation item bringing me here in a flash,” Dagan said. “And if I'm getting a phantasma-class item out of this deal, I'll answer as many questions as you want. I mean, we're talking about something that's usually kept as a national treasure, for Pete's sake! In fact, I'd be willing to have a whole *slew* of meetings if it means getting my hands on a phantasma-

class item each time!”

Dagan exploded into a jolly belly laugh at his own joke, and I couldn't help noting that he was the exact opposite to how cranky Naano used to be, back when we were in the Concord of the Tribes. In fact, Dagan seemed so easygoing, I was unsure how formally I should address him, but he continued talking without even noticing my mild bemusement at his demeanor.

“The messenger you sent to my room tells me you folks want to know about Masters, but I'm afraid I don't really know a whole lot about that subject. I can tell you what I *do* know, though, if that's all right with you,” he said.

“Yes, that's perfectly fine,” I replied. “We only wish to hear what you personally know about Masters.”

“Okay, your call. Here's what I know...”

Dagan proceeded to give an account that basically matched everything we already knew about Masters, with no new information on them. But in the midst of his yarn, Dagan related something that was quite intriguing.

“From what I understood of it, the ones who actually made the call to kill the kid who turned out not to be a Master were the rulers of the dragonutes and the demonkin,” Dagan said. “Those two proposed killing the boy and nobody objected, so the matter was settled. Don't ask me why they wanted to assassinate that boy, though.”

When I pressed Dagan for more details regarding the decision, I learned that the dwarf king hadn't cared either way, the elf and dark elf leaders were more than willing to kill a member of a race they hated, the onifolk ruler couldn't have cared less, and the leaders of the centaurs and the beastfolk went along with it because it wasn't particularly in their respective interests to defy the other races.

So this means the key to discovering the real reason they went out of their way to assassinate me can be found in either the Dragonute Empire or the Demonkin Nation, I thought. I found this bit of info valuable, since it had never come up in any of the mind probes Ellie had performed in the past. I smoothly transitioned from there to the main reason for our discussion, where I tested the waters to find out how angry Dagan was with the status quo, in the hope that I might be able to provide something in exchange for his cooperation.

“Thanks for all that info on Masters,” I said. “By the way, what do you think of all these limitations that are imposed on technological advancements?”

“If you'll allow me to be frank on the issue, I think it's bullcrap!” Dagan swore. “It's complete horse manure, and I don't care for it at all! How're they so *sure* that technology advancing will destroy the

world, huh? The first thing banned in their Articles of Prohibition is any attempt to research or replicate technology from that ancient civilization! Why in blazes have they made the most important thing to me the biggest crime in the world?! Do you have any *idea* how many times I've wanted to just say nuts to the law and do the research anyway?"

Dagan was angrier about the status quo than I'd thought, to the point where he was on the verge of blowing his stack. For reference, as I understood it, the "Articles of Prohibition" were a framework the nine nations had agreed to behind the scenes forbidding activities that they considered to carry too much risk. Since ancient technology had supposedly destroyed an advanced past civilization (according to which historical accounts you believed), that tech was banned. In particular, any dabbling in military-grade technology from the ancient civilization was strictly forbidden, and rumor had it that law enforcement agents would be dispatched on the spot to execute anyone violating that.

"In fact, that's how I found out that some acquaintances of mine had been playing around with that stuff in secret," Dagan went on. "They'd turn up dead somewhere or mysteriously go missing."

"But why would they engage in research that's forbidden?" I asked.

"Why *wouldn't* they?!" Dagan thundered. "There's no subject more fascinating to a researcher!"

Dagan's eyes twinkled the same way Ellie's eyes had when I'd asked her why anyone would develop a dangerous and borderline useless spell like the Koshmar Summon. It seemed to me that craftsmen were cut from the same cloth as sorcery experts, breaking taboos in order to further their own skills and knowledge in the areas they were most interested in.

"Have you heard the theory that the ancient civilization was so advanced, they were able to make phantasma-class weapons artificially?" Dagan said, carrying on from where he'd left off. "They were apparently able to craft mythical-class weapons too, and with their bare hands! Right now, it takes us untold years of labor and funding just to craft a simple relic-class weapon! I go dizzy with excitement just *imagining* the kind of technical capabilities that ancient society must have possessed! What do you think, Mr. Nobody?"

"That's very interesting," I said matter-of-factly. "So the other races have banned certain technological advancements because they think it could lead to the destruction of the world, hm? But do you have any idea what exactly *did* cause the downfall of that past civilization, King Dagan?"

"Hmm..." Dagan took another sip from his teacup, leaving a

pregnant pause hanging in the air that was a complete departure from his previous outpouring of words. He then fixed me with a piercing stare.

"If you really pressed me for an answer to that question, I'd say I don't know either," Dagan finally said. "Of course, I'm aware of all the various *theories* the historians talk about, but I'm pretty sure those aren't the kinds of answers you're looking for, are they?"

"No, sir," I said.

"And fact is, I've been wondering about it too..." Dagan said before another showy pause where he stared off into space. "So let's assume technology gets so advanced that it ends up destroying the world; how do you think that'd happen?" Dagan asked to finally break the silence.

"Honestly, I wouldn't be able to say," I replied. "Though if I were forced to come up with an answer, I'd say a war could well destroy the world as we know it."

"Possibly," Dagan said. "For me, I reckon it'd be something like a huge magical explosion that destroys everything, though maybe that's because I'm a technician by trade. I've seen plenty of greenhorns blow their fingers off in their attempts to craft a magic item. I can just imagine a similar mistake but on a much grander scale destroying the world. But then again, would a huge explosion be capable of wiping practically all traces of a civilization off the map?"

I listened in silent contemplation as Dagan continued. "I mean, yes, we're talking about a civilization capable of manufacturing mythical-class weapons here, so it's not beyond the realms of possibility that they'd have weapons that could wipe out their whole society. But if that is what happened, why didn't anyone who lived through all that destruction leave behind any records on what caused it? Some races can live for over a thousand years, yet we don't even have an oral history from that period. If the destruction was so total that it left behind no one to pass down legends about it, how are we even here today? By all rights, there should've been no one left to sire any descendants."

A chill ran up my spine on hearing Dagan's words. My allies and I had been wrestling with this question too, but hearing it from this dwarf's mouth made the paradox all the more disconcerting. There was only one way to square that circle, and seemingly realizing that we were both thinking the same thing, Dagan grinned and voiced his theory.

"There has to be some sort of godlike figure roaming around who's more powerful than any of the nine races or the people from that ancient civilization," Dagan stated. "Otherwise, none of this makes any sense."

I laced my fingers together as I ruminated over what Dagan had just implied: a god that once destroyed an advanced ancient civilization still walked among us. *A god?* I asked myself. *You only hear about beings like that in myths. Though maybe the word “god” is a metaphor for something else? This non-Master entity I’ve heard about, perhaps? Or is this god something else entirely, like a Master that has evolved into something greater?*

While these thoughts buzzed around my head, Dagan continued, his words snapping me back to reality. “I myself am very curious about the kind of technology a Master would possess, but I don’t give two hoots about anything else to do with those beings,” he said. “If you wanna know why an ancient civilization collapsed, or if there’s some higher being out there walking among us, that’s for some beady-eyed academic to figure out. I can’t give you a definitive answer on any of that stuff, no matter how long I sit here and think about it all. If you want more info along those lines, I suggest you go ask the dragonutes or the demonkin.”

Dagan stroked his beard as he elaborated on his reasoning. “After all, the quality of the info you’ll get depends entirely on the race. Us dwarves and the dark elves are all about technology, plus the elves are more focused on making sure their bloodlines trace back to Masters. I don’t know about the onis, but I’m guessing they’re a lot like us dwarves, given their nature. Humans, beastfolk, and centaurs are too weak to have access to the really good nuggets of information.”

Dagan paused briefly. “But the amount of information dragonutes and demons possess is far greater than any of the other races. I wouldn’t be surprised if those two races knew of a god that could destroy an entire civilization, if one exists. The only problem is that those two races command militaries far more powerful than the Dwarf Kingdom’s army. And the leaders of those two nations will definitely *not* be open to the kind of hush-hush confab we’re having right now.”

Well, to be frank, these secret meetings with the Human Kingdom and the Dwarf Kingdom were the exception, as I’d originally planned to take the straightforward approach and simply topple nations, like we had done with the elves and dark elves. But as Dagan pointed out, the dragonutes and the demonkin were military superpowers of a kind we had yet to face. My inner circle and I had agreed long ago—before I’d even started sending people up to the surface world, in fact—that those two nations would be the most difficult to fight. At this moment in time, we had the Elven Queendom and the Dark Elf Islands in our pocket, and we could make contact with and gain intel from the Human and Dwarf Kingdoms, but all of that was little more than a prelude to the *real* war with the outsize threats posed by the Dragonute Empire and the Demonkin Nation. *I guess Dagan’s right, I*

thought. *If I really want any more useful intel, I'll have to engage the dragonutes and the demons.*

"Well, leaving aside all my hot air, there are *other* ways of uncovering the truth about what destroyed that ancient civilization," Dagan said. "And one good way would be to excavate ruins they left behind."

"What?" I said after a pause. I had been in the middle of racking my brain over how I'd go about making war with the dragonutes and the demonkin when Dagan had made a startling pitch to me like it was no big deal. Now that he was sure he had my full attention, the dwarf king grinned impishly as he continued.

"What I have to say stays in this room," Dagan warned conspiratorially. "We dwarves know of a huge archaeological site dating back to that advanced ancient civilization that we've been keeping under wraps for generations. The ruins are located underground, and as far as we know, are still largely intact. If we were to explore every inch of those ruins, we might find our answer as to why that ancient civilization was wiped off the face of the world."

"Isn't archaeological research the work of 'beady-eyed academics,' as you put it?" I asked.

"What *you're* looking for is the truth, and what *I'm* looking for is ancient technology," Dagan said. "Even though on the surface, we're after different things, at the end of the day, we share the same goal, don't we?"

"I think I get the picture," I replied. "So what exactly *is* this 'goal' we're talking about here?"

"We team up and explore those ruins," Dagan replied, thrusting himself forward and leaning over the table. "I'm sure you can guess that we've sent countless teams of explorers into those ruins over the years. Not a single one has ever returned."

Dagan took a moment to reflect on these tragic losses. "They were some of the bravest, most accomplished adventurers we could get for the job, and we equipped them with magic items and weapons that were the latest in dwarf tech. I have to admit, I can't even begin to imagine the kind of power level you'd need to have in order to explore those ruins. But you sent a real crackerjack to my castle who was able to sneak into my room without anyone noticing, and I'm willing to bet you have other highly capable retainers. So here's my proposal: I want you to lend me some of your people so that we can finally explore these ruins that were beyond the reach of my dwarf forefathers."

"That's an interesting proposition you make," I said. "But are you certain we'll be able to find the answers I'm looking for in those ruins?"

"Well, sure, maybe you won't," Dagan admitted. "But what we *do*

know is these are highly advanced ruins and they're on a scale never seen before. That's why us dwarves have kept this supersite a secret for generations, so that none of the other races can destroy the ruins or take 'em away from us. I promise you'll be convinced the ruins will have something to offer if you come and take a look at them for yourself. Of course, I'd prefer you to let us dwarves have first dibs on all the technology and nuggets of research we retrieve from down there, but we'll let you keep all the gold and treasure we find. We'll take care of all the preparations on our end, so what do you say? Are you willing to lend us a hand?"

Dagan was pressing me with a clearheaded fervor of a type that I hadn't seen from him up to this point. His eyes were wide with excitement and anticipation in a sort of "mad scientist" kind of way. *He looks just like Ellie does when she's deep into researching a new kind of sorcery she's just discovered,* I thought absentmindedly.

In any case, while I had gone out of my way to arrange a meeting with Dagan so that I could secure the dwarf king's cooperation, I never in a million years imagined Dagan himself would practically beg for my help in exploring some ancient ruins. *Still, I can't say I'm not intrigued by the prospect of some huge ancient ruins,* I thought. *If these ruins are the type that have gone unseen by living eyes, it might provide a bunch of clues on what brought about the destruction of that advanced ancient civilization.*

If I got lucky, the ruins might even point me in the right direction regarding stuff like the secrets being kept by the dragonutes and the demonkin, the reason why the world banned technological advances, and maybe even the truth about this "non-Master being" they all seemed so afraid of. And I could probably get all of that info from the ruins, without ever needing to set foot in the dragonute or demonkin nations. Even though none of the other people who had attempted to explore the ruins in the past had survived to tell the tale, I guessed it would be easy enough for me and my allies to succeed where they'd failed, given our capabilities. And to be perfectly honest, I was just plain curious to find out what these ruins actually looked like, and that was true even if they didn't contain any of the intel I was looking for. And I was fairly sure the ruins would contain a bunch of valuable stuff too. But again, even if there were no useful items lying in wait to be retrieved, any adventurer would leap at the opportunity to explore the ruins of a long-lost civilization. So in the end, after considering all of these factors, I agreed to help Dagan.

"All right. I accept your proposal," I said. "I hope we will be able to hash out the finer points of our deal beforehand?"

"Oh, *thank* you, Mr. Nobody!" Dagan exclaimed. "Of course we can talk about the particulars! We can do that right now if we have to!

Whatever you want, whatever concessions you're looking for, just name them and they will be done! I'll do everything in my power as the dwarf king to make sure your side is well taken care of!"

We hadn't even gotten started on negotiating the stipulations of our deal, yet Dagan had already agreed to all of my conditions without even bothering to hear what they were. The dwarves must have really wanted access to those ruins and the kind of technology that could be found within. The only question that remained was exactly how vast and expansive *were* these ruins? This uncertainty floated around in the back of my mind while I started reeling off all of my conditions.

Chapter 3: Arriving at the Ruins

So as a result of my clandestine meeting with Dagan the dwarf king, I was locked in to explore a large network of underground ruins. I was totally on board with this, because these ruins might turn up clues that would answer how advanced technology could have destroyed a civilization, and whether there was truly an entity more powerful than a Master walking among us. Plus, the fact that we could gain intel from the ruins without needing to attack the dragonutes or the demonkin, who we suspected of hoarding these secrets, was another draw.

The deal seemed a good one for both parties. The dwarves would gain access to technology that had been banned by the other nations, and in return, they would align with me and my goals. The possibility of finding useful items inside the ruins was another potential bonus for us.

Once Dagan and I had finalized our partnership, Mei and I revealed our faces and reintroduced ourselves using our real names. A few days later, we would also decide on a date that we would start exploring the ruins.

“We’ve received a written contract from Dagan promising to cooperate with us after the completion of the quest in the ruins,” I told Mei in my office in the Abyss. “This should guarantee that I’ll be able to take my revenge on Naano as well as getting the dwarves to back Princess Lilith as the new ruler of the Human Kingdom.”

“Those are very impressive results, Master Light,” Mei replied. It was the evening following my meeting with Dagan, and just like Lilith had told us, we had easily reeled in the dwarf king by dangling a phantasma-class item in front of him, then quickly landed a partnership with the Dwarf Kingdom by appealing to their anger over the ban on highly advanced technology. However, there was still one issue rattling around in my head.

“We still have no clue how big these ruins are,” I said. “But I guess the only way to find out is by diving straight in.”

“All that we truly know is that King Dagan simply referred to the size of the ruins as being on a ‘scale never seen before,’” Mei stated.

Dagan had touched on some aspects of the ruins once we’d signed duplicate copies of the contracts for both of us to keep. Apparently, they were originally discovered completely by accident over a

thousand years ago when prospectors were digging around for minerals to the southwest of the royal capital. Later on, the dwarves came to realize that the ruins that had been found formed a huge archaeological site, and subsequently did everything they could to hide the discovery from the other races. Over the centuries, the Dwarf Kingdom had sent parties of adventurers into the ruins to explore them, but because nobody had ever come back alive, there was zero information on what lay inside.

“I get what he’s trying to say, but that total lack of info really doesn’t help things,” I muttered.

“He also added that he had no way of detailing anything else about the ruins without actually entering them,” Mei recalled, sighing slightly in exasperation. Dagan really had nothing else to offer in terms of information—no maps, no profiles on any of the monsters inside, not a single thing.

“Dwarves don’t tend to go for double-talk, so I’m pretty sure we aren’t heading into a trap,” I surmised. “In any case, we should assume that the ruins are even larger than the Abyss and assemble some of the best people we have for this quest. Now that everything’s in place, we have no choice but to show up on the appointed day to escort Dagan and his entourage around the ruins.”

“If we were to go in there without the dwarves, there would be little need, if any, to ensure the safety of everyone present,” Mei said, sighing shallowly once more. “But Dagan insisted on accompanying us with some of his compatriots.”

Dagan had made up his mind to tag along once he realized we had a bunch of teleportation cards. Magic items capable of long-distance teleportation were very rare, according to Dagan. The parties of adventurers sent to explore the ruins before had also taken teleportation items too, but they had only been capable of relocating the user a few hundred meters away from their starting position, which obviously hadn’t been enough to ensure their survival. But once Dagan realized my SSR Teleportation card had transported him beyond the borders of his nation, he came to the conclusion that he could easily escape with one of them if things got hairy in the ruins. Knowing he would have this bit of insurance in his pocket, it went without saying that he wanted to tag along with us so that he could be there to witness what might turn out to be the discovery of the century. Sure, we could’ve flat-out refused to babysit Dagan and his pals, but we had to take into account that these were ruins the Dwarf Kingdom had worked hard to safeguard and keep under wraps for centuries, so in the end, we compromised and agreed to take him and his associates at least part of the way, on the condition that if it got too dangerous, we would bring the dwarves back up to the surface

before my team and I continued on alone.

“I totally get how someone would be super excited about exploring the ruins of an advanced civilization that’s been kept secret for years,” I said. Besides, I knew my team could handle being handicapped by the dwarves, and we’d told the dwarves we’d do our part to fight off any enemies, but aside from that, the dwarves would ultimately be responsible for their own safety when they got inside those ruins. I was pretty sure they understood the gist of what we were driving at.

“Well, we can’t bring Ellie because she’s too busy with the development of the settlement around the Great Tower, and Aoyuki’s out too, since she has to keep watch on the perimeters around the tower and the Abyss,” I said. “In that case, I say we go with a party consisting of you, me, Nazuna, Mera, Jack, and Suzu on this quest.”

It was a shame we had to leave Ellie and Aoyuki behind, but I figured Mera, Jack, and Suzu would be a good fit for this mission. I also thought bringing Nazuna along was a good idea because there was no telling what was lurking down in those ruins, and she should be able to overpower almost anything we might come across.

“Understood, Master Light,” Mei said. “I will inform those you have listed of their assignments. Do I have your permission to select some replacements who will take over our duties here in our absence?”

“Yes, please, Mei,” I replied. “I trust you’ll pick the right people for the jobs.”

“Thank you very much, Master Light,” Mei said. “On my honor as a maid, I vow to perform my tasks to the best of my ability!”

Mei bowed to me, then exited my office. Knowing how Mei was probably super thrilled that I was trusting her with everything, I couldn’t help chuckling with slight bemusement as I watched her go. Though I had to admit, I also felt a bit of a thrill, except my excitement came from imagining what kind of dangers and discoveries I might find in these humongous ruins.



Roughly two weeks later, Dagan made plans to go on an official tour of the western lands, as cover for the trip to explore the ruins. The dwarf king intended to send the delegation off to one of the port cities where they would kill a bit of time while Dagan and a select crew stole away to set about their real mission of seeing what was inside the massive ruins for themselves. Dagan’s squad would include experts in their fields who were ready and willing to risk their lives if it meant exploring what remained of an advanced ancient civilization.

I thought they were supposed to be these fancy-pants dwarf engineers, I

mused. *There is such a thing as being too eager.* The idea that I was taking along what was essentially a good chunk of the Dwarf Kingdom's ruling class on a potentially deadly quest made me worry about who would be left running the nation, but I decided to keep these concerns to myself. Once my team and I were ready, we joined Dagan's delegation as they made their way westward, then my team, Dagan, and his two tagalongs split off from the main group and departed for the ancient ruins.

"I wonder what we'll find in these ruins," I said, absentmindedly staring up at the clear blue sky. "Will we have to contend with snakes? Or dragons? Or maybe even..."

Since the ruins were located southwest of the Dwarf Kingdom's capital, we'd initially taken a highway that snaked west through the mountains all the way to the sea. The kingdom was a mountainous nation replete with mineral resources, and dwarves were constantly prospecting sites with an eye to opening up new mines. Since there were more than a few dwarves who were experts in resource exploration, it was probably no surprise the kingdom exported all kinds of minerals and raw materials. There were also a bunch of caverns cut into mountains in the Dwarf Kingdom that either contained relics from a lost civilization or had magically turned into dungeons. In fact, the giant ruins we were heading to were just one of many sites that the kingdom was famous for.

Another thing to note about the ruins Dagan wanted to explore was that the site was so huge, it was thought parts of it actually crossed the border into the Elven Queendom, lying squarely beneath the mountain range and wild forest that separated the two nations. This meant the ruins didn't just face the threat of the other races meddling with them; the Elven Queendom could stake a claim to the ruins, along with all of the magic items and resources contained inside. I could understand why the dwarves had wanted to keep the ruins a secret to prevent something like that from straining their relations with the elves, but since my Great Tower now controlled a large swathe of the wild forest, the dwarves didn't really need to worry about the elves demanding a chunk of the ruins.

"Well, here she be!" Dagan announced, standing inside an echoey cavern. "These are the ruins our dwarf ancestors have kept secret for centuries!"

After arriving at an old prospecting cave dug into the side of a mountain that looked like all the others, we had squeezed our way through a dwarf-size mining tunnel until we were deposited into the vast new world I was now staring at, wide-eyed.

"Whoa. Now I get why you said I had to see it to believe it..." I said breathily.

“I agree,” said Mei. “It is indeed a wondrous sight.”

“Wow! There’s a whole buncha buildings here I ain’t ever seen before, master!” Nazuna piped up.

Jack whistled. “Dude! Never thought a bunch of secret dwarf relics could look this dank. This quest’s gonna be *sick*, I can feel it!”

Suzu peered around in astonishment at what she was seeing, leaving Lock to sum up the feelings of both of them. “I’m shocked there’s a place like this underground.”

“You and me both, hun,” Mera said after her usual bout of chortling. “And we had to crawl through such an unbearably narrow tunnel to get to it too!”

Dagan stood in front of the first of the ruins and stroked his beard with an air of smugness. The first thing to note was that the cavern was so huge, it could easily fit a castle or two inside it, and you had to strain your neck just to make out the ceiling. If that weren’t enough, it looked as if someone had hauled a whole factory town into the cavern. There were factories, railway tracks, metal cranes, and other heavy equipment, buildings that looked like warehouses, you name it. And what was more, everything appeared to have been solidly built, to the extent that it had all largely remained intact for the X-number of centuries it had stood here unused. Dagan and his crew strolled slightly ahead of the group to guide us through the factory town.

“From what our grandpappies were able to tell, these things were built in a totally different way from any of the structures you can find on the surface,” Dagan explained. “Which means that advanced ancient civilization probably built all of them. You almost never find ancient factory towns like this, and certainly not ones on this scale. However, the *real* can of worms is a little farther up ahead.”

Dagan’s entourage continued to lead us through the huge cavern until we reached the farthest end of it, where the dwarves stopped and held their lanterns high to illuminate our surroundings so we could see what they had brought us to. Though if we’re being perfectly honest, my team and I had no need for lanterns, since our elevated power levels meant we could see perfectly fine in the dark.

“This must be the hole,” Dagan said. “Can’t be a trap, since it’s so clearly marked. Plus, it’s too big for anyone not to notice it.”

There was indeed a large hole in the ground at the very rear of the cavern, and it appeared to be surrounded by a number of curved, hooklike protuberances that arched over the chasm. The arching freestanding columns were made out of some kind of gray stonelike material with what seemed to be black granules mixed in, while the hole itself looked a good ten meters in diameter, which basically meant it was large enough for a full-grown giant to plunge into without touching the sides. I tried to peer down into the pit, but even

with my Level 9999 eyesight, I couldn't see all the way to the bottom through the swirling darkness. It was like I was looking into the gaping maw of all that was evil.

"We originally thought this dratted hole was for tossing away trash, but after doing a bit of rooting around, we found out almost immediately that it was used for something else," Dagan explained. "First off, you'll note that these columns are made out of a different-colored material than the buildings. Not only that, but this stuff's terrifically strong like you won't ever believe."

Even a nonengineer like me could tell that the buildings were made out of brick, and all the other equipment was steel. But I didn't immediately recognize the material these freestanding columns were made out of, and even though it *looked* like granite, when one was tapped, it made a metallic sound.

"We tried to break off a piece so we could analyze it up on the surface," said Dagan. "But no matter how much we hit it with hammers or fired magic at it, we couldn't even scratch it. We've never seen or heard of anything as dratted strong as this!"

Dagan's declaration that these tusklike columns were made from some unknown, unbreakable material caused Nazuna, Mera, and Jack to look at the freestanding structures with a renewed fascination. They were obviously wondering if they'd be able to break off a piece of one of the columns using their own strength. Alert to their intentions, Suzu took a few steps back from the group, and Mei treated the would-be troublemakers to an icy glare. As for me, I chuckled internally with embarrassment and carried on listening to Dagan's commentary.

"Do you think a hole surrounded with such super strong columns would only be used for dumping garbage? Nay, I say!" Dagan declared. "This is only a hunch, but we believe this hole was made for transporting the products manufactured in these factories to some underground destination, as well as for hauling things up here too. If we're right, it would mean this hole leads to more relics from the time of the advanced civilization than what we can see in this cavern, and it'd mean we're on the brink of discovering the biggest archaeological site this world has ever seen!"

The buildings in this cavern alone would likely have already counted as one of the biggest archaeological finds in history, so my mind boggled at the idea that this ancient civilization might have sent factory products to an even larger area deeper underground. I was slowly beginning to realize why the dwarves had been so sure that this was the biggest archaeological complex in the known world.

"We tried measuring how deep this hole was by dropping objects into it and listening for sounds, but we never heard anything," Dagan continued. "Unfortunately, this is also where we lost several good men

that we sent on quests to find out what's at the bottom. None of them ever returned."

Those men the dwarves had lost had included famed adventurers and technical experts. Did that mean there was a trap partway down, or some powerful monster lying in wait at the bottom? No wonder Dagan was eager for our help after seeing Nemumu in action and his subsequent teleporting. I couldn't imagine how any average or even above-average adventurer could come back alive after plunging into a pit as forbidding as this one.

"So what do you think? Think we can make it all the way to the bottom?" asked Dagan.

"Mei?" I said, turning to the maid.

"I foresee no problems," Mei stated. "I can use my Magistrings to lower everyone safely to the bottom of this pit even if there are traps present."

Mei could produce a whole host of objects with her Magistrings and even infuse the strings with mana to manipulate the hardness, strength, shape, and material quality of the objects she created. That meant she could create an enclosed gondola we could use to lower ourselves into the hole, while Magistring barriers could also protect us from projectiles or magical energy blasts if the hole did contain traps. For good measure, my crew and I could stand in a circle around King Dagan and his associates to shield them from danger.

"Ah!"

A guilty-sounding noise escaped from Nazuna's lips, like a kid caught making a mess, and I could have sworn I'd heard something crack at the exact same moment. I turned to see Nazuna holding a chunk of the material from one of the tusklike columns—the same material the dwarves had been unable to damage even after centuries of effort. Nazuna had gone pale, like she knew she was in big trouble. Apparently, while Dagan and I had been busy discussing the giant hole and what lay at its depths, the other dwarves had dared Nazuna, Jack, and Mera to break off a piece of the freestanding arching column. And if that wasn't enough, the trio hadn't tried to punch or kick the column, since that would've given them away—no, they had attempted to break off a piece of the column just by silently grabbing a hold of it and pulling. Jack had gone first, then Mera had tried, but neither had been able to even crack the column, no matter how much they strained. But when it came to Nazuna's turn, she easily tore a small chunk off the tusklike column. The dwarves who had initially dared my allies into this course of action had suddenly fallen silent as they hungrily eyed the hunk of column Nazuna was holding. Even Dagan was staring wild-eyed at what was in her hand.

With everyone's eyes on her, Nazuna nervously tried to explain

herself. “J-Jack and Mera tried to break it too, but they couldn’t, so, uh, I-I thought it’d be okay if I tried too. But I broke too much off.”

“Nazuna...” I began. “Why would you do that?” Hammers and magical blasts hadn’t put a dent in these columns, but they were no match for the strongest warrior in the Abyss.

Nazuna started to sob. “I-I’m sorry, master...”

“For crying out loud,” I sighed. “These ruins belong to the dwarves. You can’t go around damaging them on purpose. You weren’t even being attacked by an enemy.”

“Y-Yes, master,” Nazuna whimpered, my scolding making her go even paler. She was trembling as she turned to Dagan’s entourage and lowered her head in shame. “I’m sorry, dwarf misters.”

Suzu, Jack, and Mera followed suit and bowed to apologize.

“W-We’re sorry too. We should’ve stopped them when we had the chance,” Lock said, speaking for Suzu.

Mera chuckled nervously. “I apologize too. I couldn’t help finding out how strong it was for myself after hearing the material was practically unbreakable.”

“Y-Yeah, my bad, bros,” Jack added. “I shouldn’t’ve gone testin’ my strength neither.”

I turned to Dagan to apologize too. “Sorry about what my allies have done to your ruins. I can assure you they didn’t mean any malice in damaging this valuable piece of your heritage. They were simply trying to test the strength of the material, so I hope you can forgive their behavior.”

“O-Oh, no, I don’t mind at all!” Dagan said quickly. “In fact, could you let me take a look at that chunk in your hand, young miss?”



“M-Master?” Nazuna asked, seeking my approval. I nodded to indicate that it was fine, and the Vampire Knight extended her right hand that contained the piece of gray-dappled-with-black building material. But it wasn’t just Dagan who was drawn to her outstretched hand—the rest of his dwarf crew also skittered toward Nazuna like ants.

“How did you tear off a piece of that unbreakable column?” Dagan marveled, taking the chunk from Nazuna.

“King Dagan! Lemme take a look!” one of the dwarf specialists piped up, grabbing the chunk.

“Hey, wait a minute! You don’t get to be first!” the other dwarf expert objected, raising his voice. “I need to see it up close!”

The dwarves were snatching the hunk of debris from each other, all of them with a mind to performing some kind of experiment on it, and the group—including Dagan—soon devolved into an all-out fistfight over who would get dibs on the specimen.

“M-Master?” Nazuna mewled as she grabbed my arm, clearly weirded out by the scuffling. “D-Did I do something wrong again?”

Suzu and Mera backed away from the melee between the dwarves, and even Mei started rubbing her forehead at the unfolding scene. I mirrored Mei’s reaction by pressing a hand to my head.

“It’s fine. None of this is your fault,” I told Nazuna. “In fact, I think it might be *our* fault for underestimating just how seriously the dwarves take advanced workmanship.”

Even given the fact that the dwarves had never been able to break off a sample from the tusklike columns, I never imagined they would actually come to blows over a simple piece of rubble. The more bizarre part was that it hadn’t even crossed any of the dwarves’ minds to simply ask Nazuna to break off some more chunks so they could each have one. Were they really that desperate to get their hands on a piece of this mysterious material?

Before the brawl could escalate further, I stepped in and told the dwarves Nazuna would chip off some more specimens for them. My top warrior did just that, and the dwarves looked pleased as punch as they put their hunks of column with their belongings. Once the dwarves were done making sure they were securely packed away, I gave Mei a look that signaled she could start lowering us into the pit. Mei nodded, then used her Magistrings to make a gondola that dangled over the hole before stepping into the basketlike conveyance to test that it was safe. Assured that it was, she turned back to the rest of us and raised her right hand to get our attention.

“This vessel is made out of my Magistrings,” Mei stated. “It is attached by Magistring ropes to the arching structures you see around

you, and these ropes are strong enough to support several times the number of people we have in our group. I can assure you that everyone will be safe as we descend.”

“As an extra layer of protection, my team and I will form a circle around you in the gondola, King Dagan,” I said. “If anything goes wrong, let us take care of it. Mera, you will be the one responsible for responding on the off chance something happens to Mei’s Magistrings.”

Mera cackled with glee at this chance to redeem herself. “Leave it to me, master!”

Since Mera was a chimera, she had the ability to shape-shift into something that would prevent us from falling the rest of the way down the pit if something did end up severing the Magistrings. I couldn’t think of a better backup than Mera in that kind of emergency. Alternatively, I could simply activate the SR Flight card and get it to encompass the whole group, but I didn’t really want to have to deal with the dwarves causing trouble while they were airborne. It was better to keep the dwarves in the gondola, where we could easily contain their movements.

“Master Light...” The way Mei was looking at me told me she wanted me to be protected by the human wall along with the dwarves. I pretended not to notice and urged the dwarves to climb into the gondola first. I planned to be part of this human wall too, so that I wouldn’t be giving the rest of my team more work. It really wouldn’t have sat right with me to expose my allies to a potentially dangerous situation while I stood behind them, perfectly safe.

Once everyone was safely in the Magistring gondola, Mei manipulated the threads to close the entryway, and our descent began.

“Hmm, we’re going down slower than I woulda thought,” Dagan pointed out. If you were to describe the gondola’s rate of descent in terms everyone would understand, we were going no faster than a power walk.

“If we were to descend too rapidly, it would put a strain on your bodies,” Mei replied, and this answer sounded convincing enough to Dagan.

Even after more than ten minutes of descending, I still couldn’t see or sense anything that suggested we were near the bottom. While my allies and I stayed alert for any traps or monsters we might encounter, Mera shattered the silence with her trademark cackle.

“How deep can a stupid pit be?” Mera remarked. “I haven’t sensed a single monster or person on our way down, let alone the bottom of this damn thing. If you told me this hole led directly to the Undergod’s lair, I’d believe you.”

“Ms. Mera, please stop that. You’re scaring us,” Lock said,

followed by two nervous nods from Suzu. I'd heard that the fairy maids would sometimes reduce Suzu to tears by telling her scary stories, and at this particular moment, Suzu had gone so ghostly pale that even in this dark gondola, I could tell. I was pretty sure Suzu was a million times stronger than any wraith or zombie, so I wasn't entirely sure what she had to fear from them.

After a few more minutes, Mei noticed the Magistring she had dropped as a lead from the gondola had reached the bottom of the pit.

"We are about a hundred meters away from completing our descent," Mei announced. "Please watch out for any surprise attacks."

"Finally! Can't wait to see what kinda dungeon we got here, bros," Jack said excitedly, cracking his knuckles.

If any monsters were readying themselves to attack us, they were doing a very good job of masking their presence. Though even if they were to attack, it would take an obscene amount of firepower to pierce Mei's Magistring gondola. But since we were all aware that anything could happen down here, my team and I stayed on guard as we carried on to the bottom of the pit. Mei loosened the Magistrings on the walls to form windows that would allow us to peek outside, and I was immediately hit by what appeared to be sunlight, even though we were supposedly deep underground. I took a closer look out of the makeshift window and spied grasslands interspersed with clumps of forest. I also saw a structure that looked like a double helix rising out of the ground and reaching all the way up to the ceiling of the sprawling cavern, as if it were holding up the heavens themselves. The double helix gave off a soft glow, but it wasn't the thing that was lighting up this underground world. No, that would be the bright light source attached to the ceiling that was mimicking the sun.

"How could a place like this exist inside a deep, dark pit?" I wondered aloud. "Is this supposed to be part of the ruins left behind by that ancient civilization?"

Nobody heard my little soliloquy, though, since they were all too busy looking out of their own windows and marveling at the view in front of them.

Chapter 4: The Sky Helix

Dagan and his two dwarf aides made noises of sheer astonishment at the seemingly natural surroundings that had been created deep in this underworld. In fact, the dwarves were practically yowling with emotion as they pressed their faces up to the narrow slits Mei had made in the gondola, their reactions so over the top that Nazuna was startled again.

“M-Master?” the Level 9999 Vampire Knight stammered, grabbing my arm again. Even though I was admittedly amazed the dwarves could frighten *the* strongest fighter in the Abyss, this feeling was trumped by the fact that I was starting to get a little disturbed by the behavior of the dwarves myself.

It'd be one thing if this were a dungeon, but technically, we're supposed to be underneath a huge archaeological site, I reasoned. If I were a dwarf scientist or researcher, I guess I'd probably be just as overexcited about this discovery as these guys are.

In any case, it was true that even as a nonscientist, I was fascinated by the sight as well. It should also be noted that there wasn't just one double helix connecting the ground with the roof—there seemed to be at least four from what I could tell, and they were spread very far apart, seemingly equidistant from each other. The ceiling was quite literally sky-high, which made me wonder how in the world the ancient civilization had been able to make these structures.

The roof of the cavern was as bright as the sun, and the trees and vegetation looked like someone had simply replanted greenery from the surface world. Dungeons were capable of producing their own forests, meadows, and hills, similar to what I was looking at presently, but this terrain differed in that it looked like it had been designed using ancient advanced technology. I also spotted structures that looked like the hole we had just emerged from, and in the middle of some of these pits, I could see hills of sand and rubble that seemed to be the result of years of destruction, cave-ins, and whatever else had been going on at the other end of the holes.

“Master Light, may I proceed to touch down?” Mei asked.

“Yes, if you would,” I replied. “Everyone, watch out for monsters or any other foes. King Dagan, make sure you and your associates stay close so we can protect you.”

“My apologies, Lord Light,” Dagan said. “This scenery is just so incredible, we took leave of our senses for a while there.”

Hopefully the dwarves weren’t going to decide to run off into one of the forests or up to one of the double helixes as soon as we hit the ground. Since everything around us had been constructed by a highly advanced ancient civilization, it was practically guaranteed there’d be something in the way of traps, mechanisms, or monsters around to ward off intruders. We couldn’t afford any wrong moves.

Mei’s gondola touched down with barely a bump, and it turned out we had landed in the middle of a meadow with thick green grass. Over to the left of us was a forest, while the double helixes stood at each of the four compass points from our perspective. As the Abyss’s most powerful tank, Jack was the first to disembark, with Suzu and Mera stepping out onto the grass next to check for traps. Once they had confirmed that it was all clear, I alighted from the gondola with Mei, while the dwarves followed close behind.

“Looks like we’re the only ones here,” Lock noted, and his partner nodded in agreement. Suzu could sniff out an enemy better than anyone else present, so that was as good a sign as any that we had nothing to worry about. By contrast, Nazuna kept swiveling her head this way and that to check out her surroundings, almost as if she could sense something.

“Suzu, Lock, ya still need to watch out,” Nazuna said. “There’s something funny about this meadow and that forest over there.”

“Nazuna’s right. We’d better stay alert,” I said. “Even taking into account the fact that we’re underground, I don’t hear any birds or insects around, or any other sounds for that matter. It’s way too quiet for my liking.”

“Yes, it is quite bizarre, Master Light,” Mei agreed as she dismantled the Magistring gondola. We all peered around and strained our heightened senses, but none of us picked up anything that might spell trouble. But out of an abundance of caution, I turned to my tank.

“Jack, if anything weird happens, your first priority is to protect King Dagan’s party. Forget about the rest of us,” I told him.

“Okay,” Jack said, smacking a fist into his palm and grinning. “Roger that, Lord Light.”

Normally, Jack would have never dreamed of using a title like “lord” or “master” when addressing me, since he considered me one of his “bros” that he interacted with on a first-name basis, but with Dagan here, he had decided to code-switch to something that resembled what a normal retainer would say for the sake of appearances. But while the rest of us were on high alert, the dwarves were decidedly not so vigilant.

“Hey, what kinda herb is this?” Dagan asked, plucking at a

random plant. "Is it edible? Maybe it's medicinal."

"I'm gonna take some of this dirt as sample specimens," one of Dagan's associates said.

"Hey! You gotta taste this soil!" the other dwarf suggested to his colleagues. "It's a shade different from what you'd find up on the surface!"

Dagan licked some of the dirt off his fingers. "Hey, you're right. I ain't ever tasted soil like it."

From my perspective, these dwarves were acting like they were completely off their rockers, but since they looked extra serious while doing it, I chose not to get involved and instead focused on the more important work of surveilling the place for danger.

"Mera, could you scout out the area to make sure there aren't any enemies around?" I said. "And while you're at it, search for anything that looks like stairs or another hole that will take us farther underground."

Mera cackled. "I can take care of all that for sure, master!"

As she said this, a number of wolves ran out from underneath Mera's skirt and a few dozen small birds emerged from both of her elongated sleeves. It was like watching a magician performing a trick. Even though I'd already informed Dagan about Mera and her powers, the sight still managed to shock him and the other two dwarves enough to make them pause in their sampling work. Mera's powers were also one of the reasons I'd chosen to bring her on this mission instead of Aoyuki. Of course, Aoyuki was a Level 9999 monster tamer who could control and form mental links with pretty much any creature in the known world, but for Aoyuki to exercise the full potential of her powers, she needed to have these monsters constantly by her side. Even though Mera's power level was lower, she could transform her body into whatever animal or monster she wanted, which was an invaluable ability for a quest like this where we had no idea what we might encounter. The only slight downside was that Mera wasn't able to form remote mental links with her monster spawns like Aoyuki could, and to get information from her spawns, they needed to reunite with Mera so she could absorb their memories. I couldn't help wishing Mera had the power to do mind melds like Aoyuki did with her familiars, since that would have saved a lot of time, but we couldn't let perfect be the enemy of good.

"Master Light," Mei piped up. "Since it will be a while before Mera finds out anything about our surroundings, I suggest we begin making camp."

I hummed as I ruminated on this. "I dunno about that. We've only just arrived in these ruins," I said. "Then again, it wouldn't be smart to wander around before we have any intel on the place. Okay, Mei, you

can start making camp—”

Before I could finish my sentence, I sensed some *things* coming toward us from the nearby forest and held my staff out in front of me, ready to engage whatever came bursting out of the trees. Mei, Nazuna, Suzu, and Mera had also picked up on the bogeys and were standing ready. Jack moved across to shield Dagan’s crew, who were looking at us in puzzlement, since they weren’t sensing any potential danger from the woods. Or at least, they didn’t look as shocked as when the wolves had rushed out from under Mera’s skirt.

“Wh-What’s going on, Lord Light?” Dagan asked.

“We’ve got company,” I said. “King Dagan, you and your cohorts must not move from that spot. Mei, Jack, and I will protect you from enemy attacks.”

“You got it! I-I will inform my associates!” Dagan replied. Not long after, the dwarves had huddled around each other in one spot to make them easier to shield. All eyes remained glued to the forest for a little bit longer until the first of the bogeys emerged from the circle of trees.

“Stone Golems?!” I exclaimed. Several humanoid Stone Golems, each around two meters tall, marched out of the woods, followed by Stone Golems resembling various kinds of animals from wolves to bears to praying mantises, even.

“I couldn’t sense *any* of these things before, so where the hell did they all come from?” I cried out. “It’s like they teleported into the woods!” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I hadn’t sensed even a single ant crawling about on the ground before this entire army of Stone Golems showed up.

“Master! Can I fight these guys?” Nazuna asked. She had already unsheathed her sword—which was longer than her body—and she looked as eager to battle as a puppy that couldn’t wait to go and run around the yard. But siccing Nazuna on the golems would have gone beyond overkill, so I decided on a much more reasonable option.

“Suzu, Lock, cover us,” I said. “Nazuna, you’re gonna be protecting King Dagan’s delegation with me, Mei, and Jack!”

“All righty, Master! I’m on it!” Although Nazuna wasn’t getting to cut loose like she wanted, she seemed happy enough to be doing something for me. Meanwhile, the Stone Golems were getting closer, with the speedier wolf-types leading the way.

“Suzu, Lock, blast them!” I ordered.

Suzu replied with a single sharp nod.

“She says we can handle them, Lord Light!” Lock said, interpreting for the musketeer.

Suzu aimed Lock up at the ceiling of the cavern, then unleashed a storm of mana bullets in the span of just more than ten seconds. The

Double Gunner was capable of firing over a thousand rounds in a minute, so she had probably discharged hundreds of bullets that all hung momentarily in the air, waiting for her to manipulate them.



After Suzu had finished firing Lock, she sent the bullets raining down on the Stone Golems.

“Get smashed, you walking statues!” yelled Lock.

The Stone Golems looked up in shock at the deadly hail whistling down toward them, and in the next instant, the bullets tore through every single one of them. The wolf-types crumbled to pieces before any of them managed to reach our position, and the other Stone Golems shattered one after another where they stood. I estimated that over a hundred Stone Golems had come charging out of the woods, but Suzu and Lock’s bullets wiped out the entire contingent in a flash. Dagan and his people stood and gawked at Suzu in shock after witnessing the gunner and her musket in action. One dwarf had even fallen on his backside on hearing the gunshots.

“Wh-What kind of intelligent weapon *is* that?” Dagan said quietly. “That hecking thing just took out an entire stinking swarm of Stone Golems in an instant.”

Mera—who had stationed herself beside Suzu in case the gunner had needed backup—simply shrugged and laughed in disbelief at the field of rubble in front of her. “Can’t these weird ruins give us any foes tougher than these rockheads? I mean, at least make it *somewhat* entertaining, you know?”

“Careful what you wish for, bro,” Jack said, smirking and using his chin to point at what was unfolding in the rubble pile. “Looks like these golem dudes ain’t like the ones you get above ground.”

The pieces of the wolf-type Stone Golems were slowly amassing back together and reforming themselves into their original shapes. The other types soon followed suit, and within a minute, the Stone Golem army had completely restored itself, as if someone had simply rewound the clock.

“How’d that happen?!” Dagan exclaimed. “Once you smash a golem’s core, that’s meant to be it! I’ve never heard of a golem that can *fix* itself!”

“Every single one of ’em is moving again!” cried one of the other dwarves. “This shouldn’t be happening! Their bodies and cores *should* have been destroyed!”

The typical way of stopping a golem in its tracks was to destroy its core, which was usually embedded in its torso, so that was generally where you would concentrate your attacks. To date, there had been no reports of a golem that could repair or regrow its body parts after having its core destroyed. I stroked my chin pensively as several hundred more Stone Golems emerged from the woods. If we had been normal adventurers, our only option in this situation would have been to run like hell.

“That past civilization must really have been something else to be able to craft golems like these,” I muttered. “How are these things able to regenerate themselves? Does this mean they’re able to repair their cores the same way they repair their bodies?”

“L-Lord Light!” Dagan yelled in my ear. “This is no time to ponder on such things! We’re about to be buried under the feet of this horde of Stone Golems!”

I flashed a wordless smile at the dwarf king to calm him down. It would have been impossible for these Stone Golems to crush me and my allies, but I couldn’t allow the dwarves to die of fright either.

“Suzu! Lock!” I yelled.

Suzu nodded and pointed Lock directly at the swarm of Stone Golems this time. A second later, a rapid-fire barrage of mana bullets reduced the golems to piles of gravel. Suzu was capable of infusing her mana bullets with all kinds of ailments, like poison and paralysis, as well as buffs, like ones that heal or physically strengthen a target, or ones that cancel out poisons or boost magical capabilities. Just a scratch from one of these ailment-infused or buff-infused bullets was enough to convey the full strength of whatever property it was onto the target, but these kinds of infusions were also considerably mana-depleting, meaning Suzu wasn’t able to fire these kinds of bullets for any real length of time. On the other hand, if Suzu could get away with just firing regular mana bullets with no extra magical properties added to them, she(?) was able to fire a continuous stream of bullets for three full days and nights if needed. Suzu wasn’t Level 7777 for nothing after all, and her elevated ability to restore mana made her capable of producing normal bullets virtually endlessly.

Because Suzu was here to cover us, I didn’t feel so much as an ounce of threat from the Stone Golems, even if tens of thousands of them were to come barreling out of the forest. If worse came to worst, I could always send in Nazuna to grind these golems into dust, though that would come at the cost of destroying everything else in the vicinity too. But in any case, none of us besides the dwarves felt we were in any real danger.

“Mei, could you use your Magistrings to bring one of those stone wolves over here to me?” I asked.

“As you wish, Master Light.” Mei extended her hands toward a Stone Golem wolf that was still roughly two-thirds intact, with its head and torso largely unscathed, and shot lines of Magistrings that wrapped around it like a cocoon before pulling it closer so that I could inspect it. At first, Dagan and his crew were fearful of the golem, but curiosity got the better of the dwarves, and they moved in closer to examine the specimen too. Mei loosened the cocoon, and I smashed the Stone Golem with a jab of my staff in an attempt to find its core. I

was in for a surprise, however.

“There’s no core?” I said. “I thought golems were supposed to have a core in their torso.”

“You’re right. There’s nothing there,” Dagan said.

“Maybe the core was in the lower half of its body,” suggested one of Dagan’s associates.

“Nope, I saw some of these golems still moving around despite losing their entire lower halves,” the other dwarf expert said. “Maybe the core’s just a lot smaller than we thought?”

“No, no, here’s what *I* think!” Dagan said, starting an argument with the other two dwarves that became so tumultuous, they clean forgot they were under attack. However, nothing I heard in the debate rose above the level of wild conjecture and none of it offered any clues as to how we could get rid of these Stone Golems. What was more, I could feel the ground trembling behind me, indicating that more Stone Golems were crashing toward us from the meadow as well as the forest. Of course, Suzu and Lock could easily turn this new horde into fine dust too, and besides the prospect of a little ringing in the ears from all the musket shots, I didn’t feel threatened at all. But we were still left with the perplexing question of how the Stone Golems were able to regenerate themselves.

I suddenly realized something. “Wait, how come this stone wolf isn’t regenerating?”

All the other Stone Golems were constantly rebuilding themselves after being reduced to rubble by Suzu and Lock, yet the stone wolf lying on top of Mei’s Magistring sheet wasn’t showing any hint of repairing itself. Dagan and his followers heard me thinking aloud and used my observation as a jumping-off point for another round of arguing, but once again, they were unable to arrive at a convincing conclusion. Amid the cacophony, I tried to figure out the puzzle in my head.

Is there something different about where I’m standing compared to where the Stone Golems are rushing at us from? I pondered. *Are we giving off mana that stops the golems from regenerating if they get too near to us? No, that can’t be it, because surely that’d mean they would also stop moving if they ended up getting close to us? Plus, they don’t have golem cores, so our mana shouldn’t be able to interfere with their life energy. There must be something that’s affecting this golem that’s obviously different from what the others are experiencing. Oh, wait!*

The answer had literally been right under my nose all along. “Mei, is this thing not regenerating because it’s on top of your Magistring sheet?”

“Master Light?” Mei queried, puzzled.

“I think I now understand how these Stone Golems can rebuild

themselves despite not having cores.”

On hearing this declaration, the dwarves stopped arguing, though one of them did shrug in quiet derision, like he thought I was just some kid playing at being a scientist or an engineer.

I paid the dwarf no attention and started explaining what I’d figured out. “The reason this wolf isn’t regenerating is because it’s lying on top of a blanket of Magistrings.”

“Sure, good, okay. That’s also a workable theory,” Dagan said. “But how do you explain the lack of a core? Without a core, golems shouldn’t be able to move.”

“You’re certainly right on that, King Dagan,” I replied. “But what I believe is happening is that the ground itself may be the source of life energy the Stone Golems are drawing on to restore themselves. It would explain why they don’t need cores. In fact, I would even go as far as to suggest that this underground world serves as one big core for the Stone Golems.”

“*What?!*” Dagan spluttered. “This whole place where we’re standing right now *is* the core?” The other two dwarves looked equally as shocked as they realized they were standing on top of a widget of a previously unimaginable scale.

“An excellent deduction, Master Light,” Mei said. “I never would have entertained such a concept.”

Nazuna gave me a look that suggested she had a huge question mark floating above her head, but she praised me likewise. “Not sure what you’re talkin’ about, but way to go, master!”

At least it looked like Nazuna knew I had found a good answer to this riddle before any of the dwarves did, so I gave her a “marks for effort” smile and stroked her head, which caused a deeply blissful look to break out on the Vampire Knight’s face. Meanwhile, the dwarves had gone pale and looked chastened that all of their book learning and expertise had been of no help in figuring out how this strange new world operated.

“So if this entire world is a core, wouldn’t that mean this lost society had the technology to move and repair golems just by keeping them in contact with the ground?” Dagan asked.

“Normally, that would be impossible, but it’s the only explanation that makes sense,” said one of the dwarf experts. “It would also mean these Stone Golems grew out of the ground, which would explain why we didn’t sense them at first and why they have no cores!”

“If we were to replicate this technology...” the third dwarf said, which kicked off yet another heated discussion between the dwarves—who had seemingly already recovered from their loss of face—and it looked as though they were even less concerned about the Stone Golems attacking and all the shooting than before.

But if I'm right, it means I have to destroy this entire underground world if I want to stop the golems from respawning, I thought. Is there some other way I could get rid of these things?

I tested out my theory by removing the Magistring cloth from under the broken stone wolf, and sure enough, the golem started regenerating. I put the pieces back on the cloth and smashed them again to give myself some time to come up with a solution. If only Ellie or Iceheat had been here, I could have gotten them to cover this whole area with ice to prevent the ground from spawning and repairing the Stone Golems, but alas, Ellie was too busy with the Great Tower settlement, and Iceheat had been placed in charge of overseeing all the day-to-day affairs in the Abyss while Mei was away. I supposed I could use the SSR Teleportation card to summon either Ellie or Iceheat here, or if I didn't want to do that, I did have gacha cards in my arsenal that could freeze everything. But before I had a chance to decide which would be the best option to go with, I noticed one of Mera's wolf spawns returning to the chimera at lightning speed. It had apparently found something. The wolf spawn dove under Mera's skirt so she could reabsorb it and retrieve its memories.

"Master, my wolf caught a whiff of water over by one of those double helixes," Mera told me, screeching with laughter. "When it went near it, it found a hole that might take us down another floor. Can I suggest leaving this place? It's gotten a little too rowdy for my tastes."

"I'm with you there," I said. "I don't want to waste any more time messing around with these pests anyway. Thanks, Mera, for finding us a way out of here. Now I know how we can deal with these Stone Golems." I whipped out a card. "SSSR Ultimate Sticky Web—release!"

The card transformed into something akin to a spider's web that covered the Stone Golems over a wide area. The web was too strongly adhesive for any of the golems to break free from it, which was unsurprising since the card was designed to trap a target for a limited amount of time. It may have had a goofy name, but it wasn't the SSSR Ultimate Sticky Web for nothing. And for those interested, yes, I did in fact have other sticky web cards in my arsenal: the R Sticky Web, the SR Very Sticky Web, and the SSR Super Sticky Web. The lower the rarity, the less the card had to offer adhesive strength, range, and restraining powers. But I digress.

"This should stop these Stone Golems for the time being," I told everyone. "I've thought of some other ways we can deal with these things, but for now, this should be good enough to give us the breathing space we need to get out of here. Mera found a hole that'll take us down to a lower level, so I'm thinking that's where we should head next. Any objections, King Dagan?"

“I-I can’t believe you’re able to stop the Stone Golems like *this*...” said the astonished dwarf monarch. “Sure, sure. We’ll do whatever you say, Lord Light.”

“Well, it doesn’t make sense to stand around here all day fighting endless waves of golems, in any case,” I said. “So let’s detour around these golems and head for that hole.”

We used the opportunity afforded to us by the sticky web to trek to the double helix near the hole in question, with Mera leading the way. The chimera fired off some magical flares high into the air to signal to her other scouting spawns to return to her. Since we were traveling on foot, it took us a good while to make it to the double helix, and even though we encountered a few straggling Stone Golems on the way, they were easily repelled by Suzu’s bullets or by my sticky web cards. Aside from those incidents, the journey was a walk in the park in the truest sense of the cliché.

After about an hour, we arrived at the double-helix structure, and at the base of it was what looked like what had once been the steel lid that covered the hole, which had been blasted from where it had been seated, likely by a previous party of dwarf adventurers that had been sent to explore this place. I gazed down into the deep chasm, but all I could see was darkness.

“Mei, you’re up,” I said, turning to my lieutenant.

“At once, Master Light,” Mei said with a bow and went to work immediately with her Magistrings to form another gondola. Dagan and his crew were the first to rush onto the vessel—maybe because they’d gotten used to the routine by now or maybe because they really didn’t want to stick around on this tier for a second longer—while the rest of us followed, with Suzu and Lock bringing up the rear, picking off any remaining Stone Golems that made an attempt to pursue us. Once Suzu and Lock were aboard, I glanced at Mei, which was the signal to depart, and she acknowledged this with a nod.

“We shall now begin our descent,” Mei announced. “I trust that nobody has forgotten any of their belongings?”

Mera cackled. “I called back all of my spawns, so I’m good to go, Miss Mei.”

Once everyone else had confirmed that they hadn’t left anything behind, Mei began lowering us into the hole with her Magistring ropes. I doubted there would be any more Stone Golems creeping up to the double helix, but just to be on the safe side, Mei tightly covered over the top of the hole with some reinforced Magistrings to prevent any unwanted company from dropping down on top of us. The makeshift seal would hold no matter how many Stone Golems tried to break through it, so we were able to make our descent with some peace of mind. To emphasize this point, Dagan breathed a huge sigh

of relief.

“Man alive. That was the craziest dratted place I’ve been to in all my years,” he said. “If we can get our hands on that Stone Golem tech, we could redraw the entire geopolitical map up on the surface. Now I’m beginning to appreciate why the other races banned all research into lost technology in the first place. By dang, I can’t even *begin* to imagine what other kinds of advanced tech this ancient civilization once possessed...”

If Dagan could take that Stone Golem regeneration technology back up to the surface world, his kingdom would be able to control an army capable of endless waves of attacks, which would definitely turn the balance of power among the nine nations completely on its head.

I know this is somewhat inconsiderate of me given what we’ve just been through, but I personally can’t wait to see what other ancient technology awaits us down on the next tier, I thought. I figured it was inconsiderate to think this because the Stone Golems had already been enough to shock the dwarf scientists, but on the other hand, I felt like I was sitting through an intermission of a play, waiting impatiently for the next act to begin. *Mera said her wolf spawn had smelled water, so maybe we need to watch out for water-based foes attacking us?* I thought giddily to myself. *Will there be a river or maybe a lake on this next floor?*

Several minutes later, Mei announced that we were approaching the bottom, which she probably knew because she had sensed something from the long leader strings she had extended beneath the gondola.

“We are about a hundred meters from the end of our descent,” Mei stated. “Please be alert for any potential hazards that might await us.”

Everybody agreed to be on guard with either a word or a nod, and a few minutes later, beams of light finally started filtering into the gondola. I couldn’t sense the presence of any potential foes, but I did notice a strong watery odor filling my nostrils. Mei once again formed windows in the gondola so that we could look out of the vessel, and we were in for yet another mind-blowing sight.

“Wow,” I breathed. “Talk about incredible.”

The small patch of land beneath the gondola was totally surrounded by what appeared to be a huge ocean that stretched as far as the eye could see, its wavelets rippling with reflected sunlight.

Chapter 5: The Sea beneath the Ruins

This was the second time I'd laid eyes on seawater. The first time had been when I'd gone on a quest to retrieve one of my former partymates, the dark elf Sionne, from a laboratory that had transformed into a dungeon. Since the lab had been located on one of the Dark Elf Islands, I'd needed to board a ship to get to my destination. I hadn't really gotten a chance to enjoy sailing across the ocean at the time, though, because I'd been too tense over the thought that Sionne, my sworn enemy, might have perished in a lab accident before I had the chance to get my revenge on her.

But here I was now, staring out at a seemingly endless body of water that was an exact replica of the ocean I had seen while on that previous quest, whitecaps undulating across its aquamarine surface. The only differences from last time were that this ocean was located underground, and like on the tier above, the surroundings were once again brightly illuminated by a light source attached to the high ceiling. Mei's gondola had successfully navigated its way through the hole connecting the tiers and was descending to a solitary island that looked about a hundred meters in diameter at most.

"It'd be one thing if this were a dungeon," I mused. "But how the heck could anybody have made an artificial sea underground?"

The Stone Golems on the previous tier had blown my mind, but the sight of all this seawater really took the cake. I had to hand it to whichever genius had decided to actually go through with this crazy project and managed to complete it.

Mei's gondola touched down on the sandy island, which had trees sparsely dotted around it, and the view from our landing spot was nothing short of incredible. Just like on the previous floor, members of my team ventured out first to check for monsters and traps, then once they'd confirmed it was all clear, they beckoned to the dwarves to alight from the gondola. I personally didn't sense any monsters or traps on this island either.

Once King Dagan and his dwarf buddies had disembarked, they started whooping and dashing around all over the island. One immediately went to work collecting samples of the sand, the flowers, the plants, and the dirt, while another taste-tested the seawater. After verifying it was safe to drink, he started gulping it down like nobody's

business. The third dwarf soberly shed his outerwear and was just about to jump into the sea when we stopped him, since there was no way of telling what lurked beneath the waves. It was entirely possible that whenever they got overexcited, these dwarves were more difficult to handle than all of the bad guys we had ever faced. It was like we had been tasked with looking after little kids on an excursion.

I sighed lightly and turned to Mera. "Can you scout out our surroundings again like you did on the last tier?"

Mera cackled like a raven. "Anything you say, master!" Once again, she released birds from both of her long sleeves, but this time, the spawns looked more like fearsome birds of prey. I watched on as the birds flew off to parts unknown, then swiveled my head to take in the entirety of my surroundings.

"Since it'll be a while before Mera's spawns return, I say we should spend our time relaxing," I said. "I'd rather not go wandering aimlessly across all this water without a destination in mind."

"Lord Light! Can we research this island and its surrounding waters until we leave?" asked Dagan, his eyes and those of the two other dwarves twinkling like boys asking if they could play a game. I couldn't really say no to them since we needed to kill time anyway, so I sighed and gave them my permission.

"Yes, you can. But my people will stick close to you," I said. "This island may be safe enough, but we don't know what might be lurking in the water, so be sure to watch out for anything."

I wasn't just saying that to scare them into being cautious. While my Level 9999 sensing abilities might have been able to detect things right at the water's edge, it was impossible to tell what lay beneath the ocean's waves, no matter how much I tried to focus my powers. Mera might have been able to scout the sea by spawning fish, but unfortunately, the rest of us didn't have that ability.

"Your people will guard us, you say?" Dagan replied. "We can live with that!"

The dwarves split up into two groups, with two walking off to the middle of the island while the third set off toward the beach.

Meanwhile, I turned to three members of my team. "Mera, Suzu, Jack, keep watch over those guys."

"We'll take the beach," Lock said. "If anything comes lumbering out of the sea, we'll blast it back to where it came from." Suzu nodded twice, agreeing with this sentiment.

"Then, I guess I'll go look after the dwarves who are mucking around in the sand," Mera said with a chuckle.

"And I'll go with Mera," said Jack. "Nothing'll happen to these dwarf bros on my watch, so you can chill and relax."

If I counted Lock as a separate entity, that meant I had an even

split of allies watching over the dwarves. As for Nazuna—who I hadn't picked for any babysitting duties—she had unsheathed her ridiculously large sword from the scabbard on her back and was using the weapon to slap down waves and dig in the sand.

At this juncture, I should mention that the sword she was carrying was one of the most powerful weapons in the Abyss, and almost as powerful as my God Requiem Gungnir. Another thing to note is that while weapons were divided into classes, these classes were not differentiated in the same way as Unlimited Gacha rarities. Unlike gacha cards, which were classified by how rare and powerful they were, genesis-class weapons through to relic-class ones were rated according to their mana content, as well as their offensive, defensive, and restorative capabilities. While the potency of a gacha card was naturally an important component in ranking the card, the primary determining factor of a card's rarity was, well, how rare the card was. Since I was the only one with this particular Gift, I guessed this was some kind of peculiar characteristic of the Unlimited Gacha.

Well, Nazuna's sword is protected by mana, so the seawater shouldn't cause the blade to rust, I guess? Just as I was losing myself in thought over Nazuna's horseplay, a voice from behind me brought me back to reality.

"Master Light, I have prepared a place where you may compose yourself," Mei stated.

"Thanks, Mei," I said. Mei had retrieved a large parasol, a table, a chair, a tea set, and treats from her Item Box, and had laid it all out for me. Mei had even made sure that everything she'd pulled out was white, as a way of providing a pleasing contrast to the blueness of the sea. Even though we were deep inside ruins so deadly that no adventurer had returned alive from them, I felt like an aristocrat about to take tea at a resort.

Mei pulled out a chair and I sat down, then she poured some tea for me. It was a sweet, aromatic tea that was my personal favorite, though I couldn't have told you its origin, aside from the fact that it came from a gacha card.

I murmured my appreciation of the tea. "Very tasty, Mei," I said.

"Thank you, Master Light," Mei replied.

The tea was just the right flavor, richness, and temperature for me, and I sipped it to the soundtrack of waves lapping on the beach. Of course, I'd heard the sound of waves during my quest to recover Sionne—first when I was aboard the boat, and then when I was in that run-down cottage by the shore—but I'd been much too tense at the time to enjoy it. However, sitting here completely at ease, I was much more aware of how extremely soothing the sounds of the waves were.

Sipping tea with this background noise isn't half-bad, I thought. Ever

the professional, Mei was standing next to me like a good maid should, but I could see she had her eyes closed and was apparently enjoying the rhythmic splashing of the waves too. I continued to sip my tea, allowing myself to fully unwind, when out of the corner of my eye, I caught Nazuna imitating the dwarves and cupping seawater to her mouth.

“Blecch!” Nazuna sprayed water everywhere, which I guessed meant she had found the seawater too salty for her tastes. Mei’s brow furrowed at Nazuna’s unbecoming behavior, but the Vampire Knight paid no attention to the Ever-Seeking Maid’s look of consternation as she came scampering up to me, teary-eyed.

“M-Masterrr!” Nazuna wailed.

“Nazuna, why would you do something like that?” I asked.

“I thought it’d taste good because the dwarves drank it,” Nazuna whined.

There was really no need for her to go copying everything the dwarves did. I gave her a cookie and the rest of my tea to get the taste of salt off her tongue. Nazuna used the tea to rinse out her mouth, then got a much-needed sugar fix from the cookie.

“Their lips touched indirectly...” Mei whispered. Witnessing the scene all the way from the water’s edge, Suzu also shot Nazuna an envious look.

Nazuna didn’t notice their jealous glares, however, and flashed me a bright smile. “Thanks a lot, master! You’re so sweet, and that’s why I love you super-*duper* much!”

“Sure, sure. Thanks for the compliment,” I said. “Just refrain from eating and drinking everything on sight next time.”

“Okey dokey! You got it, master!” Nazuna said, her proverbial energy meter fully restored. To make sure she didn’t immediately go off and do something else that was inadvisable, I asked Mei to grab another chair for Nazuna, and the Vampire Knight started munching away at the other snacks spread out on the table practically as soon as she sat down, perhaps because she was hungry. But Nazuna seemed really happy to be eating and drinking tea with me, and seeing that helped to lift my own mood.

A few hours later, Mera’s spawns came back to the island, and once the chimera had reabsorbed them, she reviewed their memories and chortled.

“Master, they’ve found a double helix on another small island due south of here,” Mera reported. “From overhead, my birds even saw an open hole near it.”

“Thanks, Mera. I knew I could count on you,” I said.

Mera suddenly blushed, then laughed again. “No need to thank me, master. Being of use to you is the highest blessing we summons

could ask for in life.”

Some people were afraid of Mera because she was two meters tall and had a mouth that seemed to stretch all the way around to the back of her head, but to me, seeing her blush with glee like that was one of the cutest things in the world. Sure, Mera had a sassy side, but I considered her sweet and adorable in her own right, and I couldn’t fathom why anyone would be so afraid of her. Sure, she was positively nightmarish on the battlefield, but I found her to be a commonsensical person who was fun to talk to.

As I was thinking this, I gazed in the direction of our intended destination. “I guess we’re heading south next, then. But how do we get across this sea?”

I could take out one of my gacha cards and release a giant sea creature that we could all hop on, I thought, stroking my chin. But once I release it, I won’t be able to return it to the card, and I don’t want to make the creature swim around indefinitely in what could be a sea filled with danger.

Of course, a high-level creature *would* be a big help if we were to engage in any aquatic battles, but it was unlikely that the next floor would contain any large bodies of water, and it didn’t make a whole lot of sense to release an ally for just a short amount of time.

Well, I think I’ve got a way better read on how the dwarves will act now, so if we put them on a leash, we can just fly to this other island, I thought. That way, we’d get there faster and it’d be much safer for them too.

Having made up my mind, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a card. “SR Flight—release,” I whispered. The card would give me and everyone around me the power of flight for twenty-four hours, though I made sure to activate the card quietly because I didn’t want the dwarves clamoring around me and begging me to sell them this “magic item” so they could research it. Instead, I pretended that I’d used a magic spell to give everyone the power of flight.

“So all you have to do is think about flying, okay?” I explained to the dwarves. “Since it’ll take you some time to get used to it, and because I want to make sure all of you remain safe, I will get Mei to tie Magistrings around the three of you and you will stay tethered to her for the duration of the flight. If you start feeling uncomfortable in any way while we’re flying, be sure to tell her.”

“Message received loud and clear, Lord Light,” said Dagan, who also spoke for the other dwarves. I wasn’t worried about my own team, but there was a slight risk that the dwarves might end up plunging into the sea if suddenly being able to fly for the first time got too disorienting for them. The Magistrings would serve as lifelines in such an event, and they also allowed us to keep the dwarves in check.

It would admittedly create more work for Mei, but at least it meant I wouldn't have to worry about the dwarves, even if we came under attack midflight.

"Okay, is everybody ready?" I said. "Mera, lead on."

Mera shrieked with laughter. "With pleasure, Master!"

Since Mera knew exactly where the next island was, she took to the air first. My team followed her lead, and the dwarves—who were experiencing flying for the first time—floated up into the air with more than a few wobbles, though they eventually managed to catch us up. Once we were all a hundred meters above the ground, we set off for our destination. At first, Mei was more or less dragging the dwarves along behind her, but after about ten minutes, the dwarves seemed to have gotten the hang of flying and were able to maintain a reasonable flight speed that was only slightly slower than the rest of us.

Now that I'm getting a bird's-eye view again, this place really is breathtaking, I thought. The island is out of sight now, and all I can see around me is water...

The horizon where the sky met the water was all that lay in my three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view, with not a speck of land in sight. I peered down into the water and saw fish sparkling in the artificial sunlight like a constellation of shooting stars. Due to the light reflecting off the water, there was a kind of blue haze clouding the horizon, which was beautiful to look at but had the effect of messing with my situational awareness, and I couldn't tell where the world started and where it ended. As a result, I started to feel a little anxious.

Oh, yeah. Those dwarf adventurers that were sent down here in the past must've found this sea too, I thought. I wonder how they got across.

Some of the dwarves must have reached the same island we had just left, because the lid covering the hole that led to this floor had been blasted from where it was seated. I couldn't recall seeing any skeletons on the island—or for that matter, any trace that past adventurers had been there—which logically meant they must have departed from the island and pressed onward. I couldn't imagine them coming fully prepared with a functioning boat, so I assumed they must've tied their belongings together and built a makeshift raft out of them.

"Master! Lookie! Look at that!" Nazuna yelled out, snapping me back to reality. "Isn't it amazing?"

I looked to where Nazuna was pointing and my eyes widened when I saw what had gotten her so excited. A huge, white, fishlike creature measuring thirty meters in length was scything through the water directly beneath us. It had three eyes on each side of its head,

and as we watched, the creature leaped straight up into the air before landing back in the water again. Everyone was mesmerized by this majestic sea creature, and even the dwarves, who had previously squealed with delight at each new scientific discovery they had come across, remained completely silent as they watched this wonder of nature—or rather, of artificial creation.

I wish Yume and everyone else in the Abyss could see this, I thought, still transfixed by the beautiful creature diving beneath the waves. Unfortunately, my feeling of awe didn't last for long because I noticed the creature twisting around underwater and starting to make its ascent to the surface again. By the time its head had broken free of the water, my sixth sense was tingling like nobody's business.

"Jack! Now!" I yelled.

"Gotcha!" said Jack. "Ironblooded Barricade!"

My hunch had proved right. At exactly the same moment that Jack activated his skintight shield and maneuvered himself in front of us, the white sea creature sprayed water from its mouth with the force and precision of a giant javelin. The water cannon hit Jack with a metallic-sounding crash as he took the brunt of the attack. Although the rest of us were subjected to a little bit of splash back, we were all fine, and Jack seemed to still be in one piece too, though he did end up having to hock out the unpleasant aftertaste of the spray.

"Dude! You got seawater in my mouth! Ptooeey! I'm glad that didn't hurt at all, but seriously, what the hell's got you *this* salty, brah?!"

"Quick thinking, master!" Nazuna said. "And good work, Jack, for knowing exactly what to do!"

"Us bros look out for each other, y'know?" Jack said with a grin and waving a hand at Nazuna, though his eyes were still firmly on the massive sea creature.

I also kept my eyes fixed on the behemoth while I spoke to Mei. "I had a funny feeling this thing was hostile. I'm wondering if this creature is some kind of guardian to keep out intruders, like those Stone Golems were on the previous floor."

"It is a Level 3000, Great White Whale," Mei stated, reading out her Appraisal data. If this whale was only Level 3000, that made it weaker than the Abyss's dungeon guardian, the Orochi, that I'd defeated three years back. That power level put it on the same plane as Hardy the Silent, the elf leader of the White Knights who Nazuna had absolutely pulverized way back when. In any case, I never imagined the ancient civilization would have the technology to create a monster *this* powerful. It begged the question, if the people of the past were this advanced, what kind of disaster could have brought about the end of their civilization?

The Great White Whale roared at a decibel that vibrated my innards before diving back into the sea. It would have really made my day if the monster had swum away for good right then, but as the saying went, if wishes were fishes...

"It's surfacing again!" I yelled. "Mei! You and Jack, guard the dwarves!"

"At once, Master Light," Mei acknowledged.

"I'm all over it! That whale ain't gonna touch none of my dwarf bros!" Jack declared.

As I was speaking to Mei and Jack, the huge back of the Great White Whale crested the surface and dozens of holes opened up on its skin, firing water cannons from them like the one from its mouth earlier. Although each of these cannons was somewhat less powerful than the previous mouth jet, this disadvantage was counteracted by the sheer number of them, which made them harder to shield against or avoid.

We had an ace up our sleeve, however. Suzu aimed Lock at the jets of water and blasted away each one with mana bullets that ripped out of the musket's muzzle. I had to admit, I sure was glad I'd brought her along. The whale bellowed once more, the sound waves making my insides jiggle like jello, as if it was trying to tell us it wasn't going to let us leave this place alive.

I had an idea that I would show this whale to Yume and everyone else if the opportunity arose, but I'm gonna have to rethink that if it's going to keep attacking us like this, I concluded with a flinty stare.

"Suzu, Mera, can you get rid of the whale?" was what I said aloud. Suzu responded with a single determined nod, while Mera erupted into evil-sounding laughter.

"We'll make quick work of this thing, master!" Mera declared flamboyantly. "This big guppy is about to find out that anyone who messes with us ends up sleeping with the fishes!"

Suzu took aim at the Great White Whale with Lock, while Mera began the process of spawning a sea creature that would take care of the beast.

"Sorry, hun, but could you cover me for a few minutes?" Mera said to Suzu. "It's gonna take me a moment or two to pop out my aquatic chimera."

Suzu nodded and Lock translated for her. "She says we can handle it." Suzu pulled the trigger and unleashed a barrage of high-speed mana bullets at the Great White Whale. Despite its large frame, the whale could traverse through the water surprisingly fast, but that didn't matter to the Double Gunner. The mana-infused bullets speared into the water without any resistance and each round struck the giant sea monster. Unfortunately, because Suzu was dealing with such a

huge target here, the mana bullets didn't seem to hit the creature with enough ailments to make much difference, but on the plus side, at least she was buying Mera enough time to do her thing.

Mera screeched with laughter and signaled that she was about to spawn a sea creature of her own. "Here you go, you blubbery marvel! One attack chimera, fresh outta the oven!"

Mera's skirt billowed outward like a giant umbrella, then out popped the chimera, which plunged into the water below. This spawn looked like a ten-meter-long orca that was black topside and white on its underside, and it came equipped with a large tusk that protruded from its head like a unicorn's horn. When the Great White Whale made a move to bob its back just above the surface again with the intention of firing off another round of its water cannons, the orca rammed into it with such force, the whale's whole top half lifted out of the water. Suzu was too much of an expert sharpshooter to let this opportunity pass her by.

"Take this, you six-eyed freak!" Lock yelled before disgorging a mass of mana-infused bullets that riddled the entirety of the whale's thirty-meter-long back. Single shots didn't do a whole lot of damage by themselves, but the sheer concentration of ailment-laced bullets meant it didn't take long before the various effects took their toll. The Great White Whale groaned in pain and attempted to dive into the depths again, but Mera and her chimera had other plans.

"Don't go thinking you can get away that easy, twerp!" Mera said, cackling.

Mera's orca was a speedy, nimble creature that could bash and smash the whale where it wanted it to go from multiple angles, while using its large tusk to stab its target for good measure, and because the whale was so big, it was unable to counter the orca effectively. The monster kept surfacing, and every time it did, Suzu and Lock riddled it with even more concentrated mana bullets. The Great White Whale roared in anguish as the hundreds of bullets with various ailments—poison, paralysis, confusion, you name it—buried themselves into its flesh, and soon, the whale's movements became a lot more labored.

The orca's attacks on the debilitated whale intensified, turning the blue sea around the whale crimson with blood. My team was absolutely dominating the whale, but unfortunately, that didn't mean everything was necessarily going our way. Either the blood in the water or the general chaos of the battle had drawn a large school of fish to our location, and they all looked ready for a fight.

"Hey, look, master! See those funny-lookin' fishes over there?" Nazuna called out to me. "They've got wings and they're flying at us!"

Nazuna was right. The school of fish had flown out of the water

and were tearing through the air toward my group. They were all flapping their wings furiously, but rather than their wings being decked out with feathers like a bird's, they were covered in thin, shiny scales. The flying fish had long snouts that looked like swords, presumably intended for stabbing their targets, but unfortunately for them, my party was too high up in the sky, so they ended up plunging back into the sea ineffectively. I counted a few hundred of these flying fish springing out of the water, but only a few dozen even got close to reaching us, and Mei used her Magistrings to chop up the handful of flying fish that came within a certain range.

"Do you believe you can defeat us with these numbers?" Mei said to the fish. "I will not allow even one of you to touch Master Light."

If the flying fish were supposed to be a trump card, it sure was a weak one. The sea also spat out a bunch of fish with dorsal fins and sharp fangs, as well as fish with heads that looked like saws, but none of these creatures got anywhere near us as we hovered high in the sky above them. Throughout all this, Suzu and Lock were free to take potshots and pick them off, while Mera's orca slaughtered any fish that got in its way.

"Looks like we have this little contest in the bag—" Something suddenly caught my attention. "Wait, *what*?"

I noticed the sea itself had started to change, now that it was becoming clear that the army of fish posed no threat to us. The surface of the sea bulged upward as if it were a giant slime, the water reabsorbing the remaining flying fish within its swelling form while simultaneously spitting out Mera's orca. This development was so unexpected, even Suzu paused in her shooting and looked down stunned from her vantage point high above it.

The water slime continued to swell until it formed an upper body several hundred meters tall and sprouted two humanlike arms. Inside this body was the Great White Whale that had been on the verge of death, as well as the flying fish, the sawfish, and all the other hostile sea creatures.

"This appears to be a Level 4000, Synthetic Bioform, Sea Slime," Mei stated calmly, using her Appraisal ability again. "It says the entire body of water constitutes this slime."

"N-No, that's impossible!" Dagan yelled. "There's no way you can create a slime artificially! And you're saying the slime's made up of this entire hecking *ocean*?! Just how advanced was this ancient civilization?!"

Dagan's words were a mix of surprise, fear, and a pinch of excitement. The Sea Slime channeled the Great White Whale into its right arm and started swinging the appendage around like a club. Mera laughed as she dodged one of its sweeping blows, while Suzu

could only stare, stunned by this turn of events.

“Whoa there. You really think any of your sloppy windmill slaps are gonna land?” Mera jeered.

“But if one of those massive arm swings *does* hit us, our flight ability won’t stop us from smacking straight into the water,” Lock pointed out. “If that happens, the slime will suck us into its body and either drown us or get its fish minions to finish us off.”

It did seem like the Sea Slime was trying to do what Lock had suggested, but Mei, Nazuna, Jack, and I were still out of its reach, since we were protecting the dwarves. The only way in which we were presently being affected by the Sea Slime’s arms was that the air fanned toward us was messing with our hair. Meanwhile, Mera and Suzu were deftly avoiding getting walloped by the slime, and at one point, Suzu saw an opportunity to fire off a stream of mana-infused bullets, which ripped through and severed one of the slime’s arms. But to Suzu’s shock, the slime simply reabsorbed the detached arm into the sea and grew another limb in its place.

“Well, I suppose we should’ve guessed it could do that,” Lock said. No matter how much Suzu and Lock mutilated or blasted the Sea Slime to pieces, the artificial monster would just keep regenerating itself using seawater.

The Sea Slime’s next trick was to wave its left arm, and in the process, throw a bunch of flying fish toward Mera. The fish hadn’t been able to reach her before because she was too high up, but the extra momentum given to them by being launched from the Sea Slime’s arm put the flying fish on a collision course with the chimera. Despite this, all Mera did was cackle like a crow that had gone stark raving mad before billowing the openings on her two superlong sleeves wide enough to catch all the flying fish coming at her. The fish that managed to reach Mera found themselves being munched on by whatever was inside her sleeves, meaning all the Sea Slime had done was give the Level 7777 chimera a feast.

We still had to deal with the whopping great elephant in the room, though. If Mei’s Appraisal was indeed correct, that meant this whole sea that stretched from horizon to horizon was one big monster we had to defeat. I didn’t even want to think about having to fight an opponent that was literally everywhere I could see.

“Hey, Mera!” Nazuna shouted. “If ya need a hand, I can always take this slime out for ya!”

Jack guffawed. “I’m vibing that, bro! Yo, Mera, if you need a wingman, I’m ready to jump in and throw down with this thing for ya!”

Before Mera could react, Dagan chimed in. “Has that girl gone mad? How could she possibly defeat a seawater slime that covers an

entire floor?! That's sheer madness! We must retreat at once!"

The other two dwarves were yelping in despair too. I could understand why the dwarves would think it'd be nothing less than impossible to lay waste to a slime consisting of an endless sea. *But if I do let Nazuna cut loose, this Sea Slime won't stand a chance against her, I thought. Then again, she's not great at controlling her powers, so there's a pretty good chance she'd destroy this whole floor in the process, and probably the one underneath it too.*

I decided it was safer to throw myself into the fight against the Sea Slime, but before I could open my mouth to tell everyone this, Mera unleashed another burst of her staccato laughter.

"Miss Nazuna, thank you for your kind offer, but I'm afraid this opponent isn't worthy of your attention," Mera said. "I believe I can defeat this adversary without causing any collateral damage. And Jack! Master ordered *me* to take out this slimeball, so keep your grubby nose out of it before I come over there and smack *you* down to size, 'brah'!"

For those who care about such things, Mera had declined Nazuna's offer of help as politely as she could since the Vampire Knight was her superior, but since she and Jack were the same power level, she had treated him to a tongue-lashing in response to a similar offer. Jack—who had seemingly known Mera would react this way—simply shrugged with an amused "Was it something I said?" kind of grin on his face.

Mera turned back to face the Sea Slime, cackling wickedly. "Well, anyways, I've had just about enough of playing footsies with you, slimy, so I'm gonna put an end to our little dance!"

The Sea Slime seemed to sway in a taunting manner, as if it understood exactly what Mera had just said. The chimera's response to this was another snide chortle.

"What's this? You think it's impossible for me to defeat you? Is that what you're implying? Well, think again, fishbrain! I wasn't just dodging your punches back there. No, I was getting ready to dish out my finishing move!"

Mera emphasized this last word by extending her sleeves and releasing a torrent of fishlike spawns from them as well as her skirt. They were tiddlers, but there were several hundred of them, and they all looked like sharp knives. When these knifefish hit the surface of the water, they scattered from the swollen slime and swam off in different directions. To those who weren't in the know, it seemed like an utterly pointless attack, but it seemed the Sea Slime knew exactly what Mera had in mind. Seeing the giant slime shudder in distress caused Mera to let out a roar of triumphant laughter.

"In case you forgot, I'm a chimera who can make living things like

you!” Mera declared. “That means I have to make a brain for each of the spawns I release. If the spawn is too big, I have to make an extra minibrain somewhere in the middle so the spawn can move right.”

Mera paused briefly to scan the water from horizon to horizon. “Seeing how your body stretches out across this entire sea, I’m guessing you need one main core and a boatload of subcores in order to stay alive, don’t you, babe? So all I had to do to beat you was send out my little fish pets to search and destroy all of your cores.”

My bet was that Mera had released chimera fish that could swim at high speed and were equipped with an ability that allowed them to sniff out bioengineered devices. If those knifefish could hunt down and destroy the main core and all the subcores, the Sea Slime would cease to exist—at least, in its current form. Given how the Sea Slime was panicking and trying to rush at Mera like a giant tidal wave before her fish could do any damage, it seemed the huge creature had understood exactly what was going on too, but despite its attempts to swat Mera, she simply hovered in one place and laughed uproariously.

“It’s way too late for you, sweetums!” Mera yelled. Right on cue, the Sea Slime seemed to crumble into the sea, as if a rug had been pulled out from under it. It looked like Mera’s knifefish had managed to successfully destroy all of the subcores in the area, meaning the Sea Slime was unable to maintain its form. The entity that had been a behemoth hundreds of meters tall only a few moments earlier crashed into the sea, causing a splash as large as a gigantic pillar.

Nazuna gasped in amazement as if watching a sideshow attraction before diving down to get a closer look at the huge eruption of water. The dwarves who had previously believed the Sea Slime was unbeatable could only stare at Mera with their jaws gaping so wide, it looked like they might detach from their mouths. Mera turned around and bowed to me in midair.

“I apologize for taking so long to beat that minnow,” Mera said, chuckling. “Though I would like to ask for a little more time so that my spawns can get rid of any leftover enemy fish, as well as to make sure that the main core and all the other subcores are destroyed. I’d feel awful if we ended up having to deal with any of those creatures again.”

“There’s no need to apologize, Mera,” I said. “In fact, I knew you’d be able to take care of those bad guys as smoothly as you did. You can take charge of the mop-up operation.”

“Thank you so much, master!” Mera replied with unguarded glee. “I’ll be sure to dispose of *everything*!”

“W-W-Wait a minute, Lord Light! Ms. Mera!” said Dagan. “I don’t mind if you destroy all of the Sea Slime cores, but if it’s possible, could you maybe retrieve a few samples of the main core and the

subcores? Those cores contain technology that can breathe life into an entire sea, and we need to study them!”

The other two dwarves nodded their agreement and waited impatiently for my answer. *Yeah, I guess any engineer would want to find out what's behind the technology of everything they've just witnessed*, I thought.

“Sorry about this, Mera, but do you mind giving King Dagan what he's asking for too?” I asked the chimera. “Though just to be clear, only do so if you think it's feasible.”

Mera cackled. “Understood, master!”

“Oh, thank you so much, Lord Light! Ms. Mera!” Dagan exclaimed. He and the other dwarves danced a happy jig in midair, to the slight annoyance of Mei, who was still tethered to the dwarves by her Magistrings.

Mera spawned some more fish designed to give the other fish their new orders. Having already finished destroying all of the hostile fish, Mera's orca returned and positioned itself beneath her, whereupon Mera lowered herself down onto the orca to reabsorb it. As for her other fish, given how vast this sea was, I figured it'd take Mera at least a day or two to recover what was left of the main core and the subcores, so I assumed she would retrieve them later on, once we were done exploring the ruins.

Since we'd done everything we needed to do at this aquatic battleground, we resumed our flight toward our original destination, the dwarves continuing to dance around in the air like little kids who had been promised new toys. *I still can't believe how much passion these dwarves have for their research*, I thought to myself. *I sure hope they don't end up being more trouble than any of the foes we come across.*

After a while, the island Mera had talked about finally hove into view. It was three times as big as the island we had left, and it had a massive double-helix tower in the middle of it that reached all the way up to the roof of the tier. On this island, there were some trees by the coastline and a small amount of ankle-high vegetation away from the water's edge, but other than that, everything was sand.

What were these sky helixes built for, anyway? I thought as I approached the island. As before, Suzu landed first to check for any traps or other surprises, then the rest of us touched down once she'd given the all-clear. Like always, the second they were on solid ground again, the dwarves set about sampling and making notes, prompting me to send Suzu, Mera, and Jack after them to make sure they didn't get into any trouble.

I took Mei and Nazuna with me to the double-helix structure, and just like at the base of the sky helix on the previous tier, a steel lid had been blasted from its fittings to reveal a hole to the next

underground floor.

“Master Light, should we make preparations to proceed down to the next level?” asked Mei.

I thought about this for a second. “Nah, let’s call it a day and start again tomorrow. Dagan’s crew must be bushed from all this excitement, anyway.” Of course, the dwarves didn’t seem all that tired as they scurried around plucking at plants for sampling purposes, but they had faced a swarm of Stone Golems, the Great White Whale, and the Sea Slime all in one day, so I figured it was better to give their nerves a rest and to set up camp here for the night.

“In that case, I will draw up a rotation for the night watch duties,” Mei said.

“Can you add me to that rotation too?” I said. “You know that I’ve been an adventurer longer than the rest of you guys.”

“Surely you jest?” Mei replied. “Your servants will gladly guard you all night long, so you are free to sleep until morning, Master Light.”

I hadn’t been “jesting” when I’d volunteered to join the night watch rotation, but Mei had still seen fit to gently refuse my offer and tell me to get a good night’s sleep instead. I knew if I persisted with my idea of keeping watch, it would only demoralize my team since they lived to attend to my every need, so I relented and listened to Mei.

Of course, there was always the option of using the SSR Teleportation card to take everybody back to the Abyss for the night, and we could have certainly done that, but there was no guarantee we’d be able to teleport back to this very spot. Worst-case, we could end up having to start from square one, and be forced to work our way down the floors again. Plus, even if we did have the ability to teleport back and forth, I felt doing that would make us too comfortable and cause us to lose our edge, which could prove catastrophic when exploring deadly ruins.

“We have all the food we need in our Item Boxes, so the only thing left to sort out is shelter,” I said. Normally, we’d be fine sleeping in tents and using thick cloaks as blankets, but since we were entertaining Dagan and his crew on this quest, we would lose face if we forced the king of the dwarves to rough it for a night. I preferred to give Dagan a safer and more comfortable setting to rest up in, so I pulled out a card and walked a few paces away from the double helix until I found a spot that looked reasonable.

“SR Cottage—release!” A bright seal shone briefly, and when it faded, there stood a two-story cottage that looked cozy and inviting. The sudden appearance of the building made the dwarves abandon whatever research they had been engaged in, and they ran up to

inspect the cottage.

“L-Lord Light! Where did this building come from?” Dagan asked.

“Oh, we just performed a somewhat *unconventional* magic spell,” I lied. “Inside, you’ll find all the basic furnishings, and you’re free to sleep in whichever room you like.”

“This was done by *magic*?!” Dagan exclaimed in awe. “Lemme see what’s inside!”

“Me too! Let me through!” one of Dagan’s associates piped up.

“No, me! I wanna look!” the other yelled.

The three dwarves scrambled into the cottage, their curiosities thoroughly piqued by it. *These dwarves are always quick to check out anything that fascinates them*, I thought, watching Dagan’s party with an air of detachment.

The Unlimited Gacha also produced N Prefab cards, which were what we were using to house the former slaves around the Great Tower, though those prefabs were made from steel and didn’t come with any furniture, so we had to give the fairy maids at the tower some additional cards in order to furnish them as appropriate. The reason we didn’t use the prefurnished Cottage cards instead for the settlement was because we had more of the Prefab cards, which allowed us to accommodate for the large throng of people we were receiving, and the steel prefabs didn’t take up a lot of space by comparison.

“Well, anyway, I think we could do with one more cottage for the rest of us too,” I said, pulling out another SR Cottage card and releasing it. It wouldn’t prove too much of an issue to stow these houses in the Item Box once we were done with them.

“Hm? Nazuna, why do you keep looking down the hole?” I asked. “Is there something down there?”

I had expected Nazuna to join the dwarves in excitedly inspecting the cottages, but ever since we’d gotten to this part of the island, she had been staring into the hole at the foot of the sky helix. Nazuna’s eyes remained fixated on the chasm, and she didn’t even bother to look up at me when answering my question.

“Master...” Nazuna said slowly. “We’re gonna hafta be way more careful goin’ down this hole than we were down them other holes. I’ve got a bad feeling about this one.”

Nazuna was the strongest fighter in the Abyss, and her unparalleled senses had apparently caught the scent of something. Mei and I shared a look and both of our faces tensed up at Nazuna’s warning.



In the Human Kingdom, just across the border from the Dwarf

Kingdom, Cavaur was riding down a highway in his horse-drawn carriage until he eventually turned off the road and made a beeline for a tree in the middle of an open field. After parking up under the tree, Cavaur jumped down from the carriage and leaned against the side of it, staring off into space, while the horses languidly munched on the grass growing in the shade. Cavaur was wearing his usual nondescript outfit, except with one minor difference: a large, conspicuous feather was sticking out of his bandanna.

"It seems they have arrived," Cavaur said to no one in particular. Sure enough, another horse-drawn carriage soon appeared in the distance, taking the same off-road detour before pulling up near Cavaur. This covered wagon had a group of adventurers guarding it, indicating that the carriage belonged to a fellow traveling salesman, but they weren't your typical escorts. No, a stench of blood and violence exuded from these men that made them seem more like highway bandits.

The merchant driving the newly arrived wagon jumped down and sidled up to Cavaur. Even the merchant himself had an intimidating expression on his face, and his bearing was more like that of a brutal criminal than an honest trader. Even though everyone in the other wagon was human like Cavaur, it was clear these were the kind of characters no reasonable person would want to mess with.

The merchant glanced at Cavaur's feather and broke the ice. "Suppose you're the client, then?"

"Naturally, kind sir," Cavaur said, not flinching at the threatening nature of the man's voice. "I have the voucher right here."

Cavaur handed over a small token branded with a telltale mark, as well as the feather in his bandanna. The merchant took the token, inspected it, then dropped it into his inside pocket.

"I brought the fresh meat you asked for. You're free to check 'em over," the merchant said, leading Cavaur around to the back of his covered wagon. The merchant loosened the cloth covering the entrance to let the two of them climb in, then refastened the cloth door. A magic item illuminated the inside of the wagon, which would have been pitch-black otherwise, even though it was broad daylight outside. The two men approached the large barrels that were clustered together in the back, and the merchant levered open one of them with routine ease. Stuffed inside was an unconscious maiden, her hands and feet tightly restrained, and a cloth gag over her mouth.

"Fresh young meat, all four of 'em, just like you ordered," said the merchant. "Besides their age, you said you didn't care one way or the other about their sexes or anything else, so I trust there won't be any bellyaching later."

"Yes, though I do remember asking for special orders that were

not on their deathbeds, either due to old age or illness,” Cavaur replied. “I do not intend to use them as slaves, but I would still like to inquire about the freshness of these specimens. I can see that this one here appears to be somewhat incapacitated.”

“We drugged ’em so they’d sleep ’cause we didn’t wanna hafta deal with the cargo thrashing around too much,” the merchant explained. “Ain’t nothing wrong with how fresh they are. In fact, this meat came from a village we raided just the other day. They’re all healthy with little in the way of injuries, so you can use ’em however you see fit, whether that’s as lab animals to test out spells or illegal elixirs, or as food for some pet monsters you’re raising.”

Cavaur and the merchant were discussing the sale of humans in the same way you would talk about vegetables. Even though the merchant was human himself, he was a black-market slave trader who sold captives to those who needed specimens for illegal research, experiments, or rituals. In other words, this merchant worked with clients who would normally be turned down by more reputable, upstanding slave traders, but who didn’t have the time or energy to capture the humans they needed themselves. And to be honest, for those with the money for it, these black-market traders represented the more reasonable option, since they took all the risk inherent in attacking villages, capturing traveling peddlers, and abducting random people off the streets of towns onto themselves.

Cavaur needed to keep Naano supplied with live humans so the dwarf could continue his project of creating a forbidden weapon. The feather Cavaur had worn in his bandanna had signaled to the merchant that he was the customer, though for the sake of security, the identifying markers were randomly changed up for these transactions. Sometimes, vetted customers distinguished themselves using pieces of cloth, necklaces, or even ribbons.

If you were so inclined, these types of deliveries could even take place within a city, but that came with a number of extra expenses for the buyer, such as bribing city officials to look the other way. To avoid these extra costs, illegal slave trades were usually conducted in the open fields outside the city limits, which afforded everyone involved an unobstructed view to make sure no suspicious onlookers were observing their transaction. Though even if someone were to ride past and witness the deal from a distance, it wasn’t an unusual sight to see traveling merchants conducting business just off the highway. Cavaur and the seller didn’t look particularly out of place, even though they were handling illegal goods in the form of human slaves.

Cavaur accepted the merchant’s explanation for the present condition of the maiden and proceeded to check on the other three

captives, just to be sure. As the merchant had said, they were all youths of both sexes, who appeared perfectly healthy even if they were all a tad on the gaunt side since they had come from a poor farming village.

"I see no issues with the merchandise," Cavaur said once the merchant had replaced the lids. "Here is the other half of the money."

"Thanks," the merchant said, peering into the sack of coins. "Money looks right. Tell you what: we'll even load the fresh meat onto your carriage, free of charge."

Cavaur laughed politely. "You are a true salesman, kind sir. I shall come to you again if I find myself needing more of the same in the future."

The two shook hands to conclude their transaction, and as Cavaur exited the covered wagon, the merchant signaled to his escorts to move the barrels to Cavaur's carriage. These men didn't just serve as escorts guarding the goods for these black-market merchants; they also took part in the raids on the human villages and knew exactly what was stuffed into the barrels because they were the ones who had put them there. The men expertly transferred the barrels between the carriages without showing a hint of displeasure, and once the task was completed, the slave merchant got back into his covered wagon, then rode it out of the field and onto the highway again. Cavaur climbed back into his own carriage and headed off in the opposite direction.

"The merchandise appears spry, so I expect Mr. Naano will find them acceptable too," Cavaur muttered to himself. "What a time to be alive, where I can just pay for the human slaves that fit my preferences, instead of needing to capture them myself."

A euphoric Cavaur turned his head toward the barrels in the wagon, and as he eyed one of them up, he was reminded of the girl he had inspected first. The memory caused drool to ooze out of the side of Cavaur's mouth.

"Oops. That was immodest of me," Cavaur said, quickly turning back around to face forward and wiping his mouth with his sleeve. "It appears my natural urges are beginning to get the better of me again. Since Mr. Naano will be quite satisfied with just three special orders, I believe it would be allowable for me to satiate my appetite with one of them."

This monologue induced even more streamlets of saliva to dribble from his mouth, which Cavaur quickly wiped away with his sleeve again. It must be noted that the word "appetite" wasn't a euphemism for some depraved urge he felt he needed to satisfy. No, he fully intended to devour the maiden in the most literal sense. Despite looking human, Cavaur needed to ingest human viscera at regular intervals in order to sustain himself.

“However, feasting in the middle of the day would leave me exposed to potential witnesses,” Cavour reasoned. “I should restrain myself until later tonight, then eat the girl while she is still asleep. Then again, I could wake her up and assure her she is safe, only to betray her trust by devouring her. That look of utter shock and terror in my prey whets my appetite to no end.”

Cavour the nondescript merchant paused to weigh up his ghastly options. “I need to deliver these special orders to Mr. Naano within the next few days, since I am sure he will need more of them soon. That means I have little time to waste. While I do thoroughly enjoy eating my prey while they writhe about and scream in terror, I risk attracting unwanted attention. If I were to seek out a secluded area to feast on her while she is alert, that would no doubt delay me in delivering these goods to Naano. With that in mind, I suppose this time I have no choice but to kill the girl in her sleep and consume her in silence.”

Chapter 6: Nazuna

After shaking the endlessly regenerating Stone Golems on the floor above, and defeating the giant whale and the humongous water slime that resided in the underground sea on this floor, we'd finally arrived by air to an island that had one of those weird-looking sky helixes on it. We decided it was a good idea to get some sleep before descending into the next rabbit hole at the foot of the helix, but before we bedded down, Nazuna had an unusual warning for us after peering down into the chasm.

"Master, we're gonna hafta be way more careful goin' down this hole than we were down them other holes," she had said. "I've got a bad feeling about this one."

Nazuna had this really childish side to her that didn't realize seawater would taste so salty until she drank a handful of it, but when it came to all-out battles, nobody even came close to her level. Even when she would face off against Ellie and Aoyuki in a two-on-one fight, Nazuna would still have the upper hand, and as for Mei, she wouldn't even contemplate battling Nazuna under any circumstance.

"I would be completely ineffective against Nazuna in a one-on-one mock battle," Mei had once said. "And even if I were to team up with Aoyuki and Ellie against her, I would only end up being deadweight for my two allies."

That about summed up just how strong Nazuna was, and I would have been a real idiot to ignore a warning from her. When we awoke the next morning, I placed the two prefab cottages into my Item Box and instructed Mei to make us another Magistring gondola that would take us down to the next tier. I had told everyone what Nazuna had said, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the atmosphere inside the gondola was tenser than ever.

"Master Light," Mei said, breaking the deafening silence. "We are approaching the bottom of the hole."

As with the other pits we had descended, Mei had attached a lengthy piece of string that extended below the gondola to tell her when we were getting near the bottom. Her announcement heightened the tension even further, and when we finally exited the hole, Mei created windows in the Magistring gondola again so we could view our surroundings.

"Now I see why you were so spooked, Nazuna," I said.

The same light source as on the previous tiers shone from the ceiling, but below us lay a bunch of massive rectangular slabs standing upright at irregular intervals all across the floor of the cavern, looking like tall dark-gray gravestones. Both the slabs and floor appeared to be made of the same dappled material we'd seen at the first-tier hole that had proven so indestructible, the dwarves had been unable to chip off a piece of it no matter how much firepower they unleashed, and it was only with Nazuna's help that the dwarves had managed to get some samples of it. Here, however, a whole bunch of craters and holes pockmarked the ground, despite it being made of the same superhard material, and as for the rectangular slabs, some had bits gouged out of them at the tops and corners, while some sections had been utterly destroyed. In short, the whole place looked like a giant war zone, meaning there was someone or *something* down here that was powerful enough to cause this crazy amount of damage. No wonder Nazuna had been concerned enough to warn us.

The gondola finally touched down, and the dwarves waited for my team to come out and scan the surroundings for danger before leaving the gondola themselves. Since this was the third time now, they had gotten used to this routine.

"Mera, search this place from the ground and the air, like you did on the Stone Golem floor," I said. "And be sure to tell your spawns to watch out for any enemies."

"As you wish, master," Mera said. "And thank you for caring about my spawns!" Mera honestly looked so happy about my consideration for her and her spawns, it looked like she had momentarily forgotten to stay alert. Once again, she produced a bunch of birds from her sleeves, and wolves bolted out from under her skirt. Dagan and his crew watched the spawns disappear off in all directions before turning to me, his facial expression a mix of fear and curiosity.

"Lord Light, is it okay if we take a look around until those things come back?" Dagan asked.

"Sure, but only if we stay together. I can't let any of you wander off on your own," I said. "Make sure you take extra care this time, King Dagan."

"Much obliged, Lord Light," Dagan said before ambling off with his crew and my team in tow. I understood that there was no point telling the overly inquisitive dwarves to stay put in a place like this, and I had to admit, I was plenty curious about this floor myself. The first thing that caught the dwarves' eye was a nearby crater.

"I can't believe something managed to cut away at this material so cleanly..." Dagan muttered. "I wonder what made this heckin' thing. Attack magic?"

"How could any attack magic carve out a crater this smooth?" one

of his dwarf associates pointed out.

“A phantasma-class weapon, then?” suggested the second associate.

“What about an elixir?” Dagan hypothesized. “I’ve seen monsters that can spit armor-melting acid and so on.”

While the dwarves were deep in discussion, I knelt down and placed a hand on the side of the crater. *It’s like someone scooped out butter with a heated spoon*, I thought, the dwarves’ curiosity rubbing off on me. *I can’t imagine what could hollow out this near-unbreakable material like this*. Even with my Unlimited Gacha cards, I would have a pretty tough time gouging a crater out of this material so evenly. The only exception would be if I were to unseal my Gungnir and take a whack at the ground. *Well, I think I can probably rule out another genesis-class weapon doing this*, I thought. *But it would need to be a weapon almost as powerful, maybe mythical-class or—*

Before I could finish my thought, I suddenly raised my head in alarm.

“Lord Light,” Dagan said. “What’s wro—”

“Take cover!” I yelled. My team had already started moving before I’d even opened my mouth, but the dwarves hadn’t noticed anything awry yet. A moment later, we saw the incandescently white energy blast hurtling toward us. Mei wove a Magistring barrier to shield us, which would usually have been enough to block pretty much any attack, but the energy blast punched clean through it like it was a sheet of cotton candy.

“Ironblooded Barricade!” Jack yelled, activating his crimson body shield. “Bros, get behind me!”

“Jack, don’t let it touch you!” Nazuna shouted. “Lemme at it!”

Before our tank, Jack, could maneuver himself in front of us, Nazuna leaped forward, unsheathing the broadsword on her back as she did so. An animalistic scream erupted from her mouth as she swung her sword toward the energy blast, batting it off course. The blast landed a fair distance away from us and carved holes out of a slab and the ground without so much as an explosion. It would appear this energy blast was the thing responsible for making the crater I had been inspecting, and Nazuna had probably known instinctively that the blast could very well have vaporized Jack if it had hit him.

We all turned our attention to the source of the energy blast—a huge ten-meter-long monster with a snakelike lower half and two arms that also looked like snakes. Perhaps more surprisingly, this creature was only about fifty meters away from us. *Mei, Nazuna, and I are all Level 9999*, I thought. *How did this thing manage to escape our notice before now?* I hadn’t let my guard down for a second, even while I’d been inspecting the crater, yet this snake monster had somehow

managed to get this close to the group without me even sensing it. It was as if this ten-meter-long freak had teleported in from somewhere.

I took a closer look at the monster and saw that it was wearing armor on its top half, which included a full-face helmet that stopped me from getting a read on its face. The bottom snakelike half was curled around a slab, and I could see some kind of spatial distortion around its snake-arms, which was probably a good indication that the blast had come from those arms.

Suzu angrily took aim at the monster with her musket. “You just made a huge mistake, Snakething!” Lock bellowed. “Time for payback!”

A stream of mana bullets erupted from the musket, showering Snakething with an untold number of rounds. The monster didn’t have time to react or move an inch out of the firing line, but in the middle of unleashing this hail of bullets, Suzu’s eyes widened in shock.

“Our bullets aren’t *hitting* it?!” Lock yelled in disbelief. “I know we didn’t miss that huge monster, because that’d just be insane!”

I was every bit as stunned as Suzu and Lock, because he was right: all the bullets *had* missed Snakething. Or more accurately, the bullets had passed through the monster and hit whatever was directly behind it. Mei—who was the only one managing to keep her cool amid the chaos—had activated her Appraisal ability and had been staring at it for a good while without furnishing us with any info from it.

“Mei, what’s this Snakething’s power level?” I called over, glancing at my lieutenant as I raised my staff in preparation to fight. “It must be through the roof if it can evade Suzu’s bullets.”

“Master Light, please be careful,” Mei said as calmly as she could. “This monster has no power level.”

“What? No power level?!” I cried, loudly parroting Mei’s words back to her, completely thunderstruck by this information. We were fighting a ten-meter-long monster that had appeared out of nowhere, had snakelike arms that could blast vaporizing balls of energy, and whose upper half was clad in armor. And on top of all of that, it had no power level? Was Snakething the product of a world with no concept of power levels, like the Soul Dragon I’d fought in Sionne’s lab-dungeon?

Snakething hissed loudly at us like a real serpent and slithered closer. Suzu sprayed the monster with bullets, but it continued to slink directly toward us, completely ignoring the shells raining down on it. I could actually see the bullets hitting its face, arms, and torso—everywhere on its body, in fact—but all the rounds just passed straight through, as if the monster were simply a mirage. Suzu gritted her(?) teeth bitterly at how Snakething was rendering her gunfire completely useless.

“Suzu, that is enough. You are clearly unable to stop it,” Mei said in a steady voice. “This creature is a mythical-class weapon created by the lost civilization. Nazuna, you will have to take care of it for us.”

“All righty!” Nazuna replied, taking out her sword once more. “I got this!”

Nazuna fearlessly flung herself at Snakething, swinging her broadsword as she bellowed another war cry. Even though none of Suzu’s bullets had landed on the creature, Nazuna’s giant blade connected resoundingly with it. Snakething managed to shield itself in time by crossing both of its snake-arms in front of its body, but the force of Nazuna’s blow still propelled it backward.

“So *that’s* why this thing doesn’t have a power level. It’s a weapon!” I exclaimed. “And not only that, it’s a mythical-class weapon!”

If you were to use the Appraisal skill on a weapon, it would only show its name, class, and abilities, but no power level since weapons didn’t have that as a stat. In other words, Snakething was a living, breathing advanced weapon.

“I’d heard that the ancient civilization could make mythical-class weapons, but I never thought I’d see one right here in front of me,” I added.

I now understood why Suzu’s bullets couldn’t affect Snakething. It was because Lock wasn’t a mythical-class weapon. According to experts, weapons could be divided into eight classes, from the perfectly ordinary common-class and slightly less ordinary rare-class weapons that were able to magically increase their sharpness, produce flames around the blade, or perform other low-grade magic to enhance their effectiveness, to the relic-, artifact-, epic-, and phantasma-class weapons that were able to affect nearby targets and other objects in some way, with each class becoming more potent the higher up the chain you went. Mythical-class weapons were a different prospect entirely, because not only could they affect nearby targets, they could also manipulate the reality we live in. And genesis-class weapons—the next step up from that—were even capable of *creating* a new reality.

Genesis-class and mythical-class weapons were treated as mere legends as the experts up on the surface world had never come across one, so many of their theories on them were iffy at best. But one thing that was certain about mythical-class and genesis-class weapons was that they were capable of isolating themselves from reality in some way, while still having the capability to affect their targets. In other words, the top two classes of weapons could actually manipulate the physical world.

In the case of Snakething, it was able to isolate itself from Suzu’s

bullets and allow them to pass harmlessly through its body. That meant the only people who could even take on this monster were me with my genesis-class Gungnir, and Nazuna with her mythical-class weapon.

Seeming to realize the significance of Nazuna's initial attack, a trembling Dagan stared and pointed at the SUR Vampire Knight.

"L-Lord Light..." Dagan mumbled slowly. "I almost swooned on seeing this living mythical-class weapon. B-But that attack just now landed, so does that mean that young gal there has been walking around with a dratted mythical-class weapon this entire time?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" I asked Dagan, honestly puzzled by his question. The dwarves hadn't appeared to take any notice of the sword Nazuna was carrying, so I'd assumed they had purposely chosen not to discuss it.

"That painfully simple broadsword with hardly any adornments was a mythical-class weapon all along?!" Dagan cried, spittle flying everywhere as he spoke. "That lass was using it to play in the sea and dig holes in the sand! Sh-Sh-She put her paws all over that blasted sword after gunking them up by handling sugary sweets! Nobody should be allowed to treat a mythical-class weapon as disrespectfully as she does!"

All I could do was awkwardly avert my gaze, because I knew Dagan was one hundred percent correct on that. As the name suggested, mythical-class weapons were the kind of thing spoken about in myth and legend, and up on the surface world at least, nobody alive in this day and age knew if one even existed. A weapon of this caliber wouldn't simply be treated as a national asset. No, *all* the nations of the world would seek to designate it as an international treasure, so if a nation did own a mythical-class weapon, it certainly wouldn't be wise to publicize it.

The highest class of weapons we'd managed to find in the Elven Queendom, the Dark Elf Islands, and the Dwarf Kingdom was phantasma-class. Yet down in the Abyss, Nazuna frequently forgot her mythical-class sword in the training grounds and, on other occasions, had spilled milk all over it. Just the day before, we had all seen her using her sword as a shovel in the sand. Then again, it was also true that Nazuna was the only warrior who could use the sword to its full potential.

"We do not know how this foe is able to evade attacks, so as of right now, you are the only one who is able to engage it," Mei said, dishing out orders to Nazuna while I was busy dealing with Dagan's complaints. "Nazuna, we ask that you defeat this weapon for us."

"Ya can count on me, Mei!" Nazuna said cheerily. "I'll be the one to protect master and everyone else!"

As soon as she'd said this, Nazuna seemed to blur as she bolted toward her opponent in a flash. I was willing to bet the watching dwarves thought Nazuna had actually disappeared for a split second before showing up again right in front of Snakething, swinging her sword full force. The deafening clash of metal on metal was so overwhelming, the dwarves reflexively covered their ears, and if the rest of us had been normal humans, our eardrums would have been ringing for the next week. After this initial blow, Nazuna smiled with glee.

"Wow, yer tougher than I thought!" Nazuna remarked. "Ever since I almost killed what's-his-name—that knight boss—the only time I've been able to fight my hardest is when I train with master! But now I can finally cut loose in a real battle!"

Nazuna was almost drunk with bellicose elation as she raised her humongous sword. "Prometheus! Bend my reality!" This incantation caused Nazuna to split into five copies of herself.

"Whaaat?!" Dagan yelled. "How is she *five* heckin' people now?!"

"M-Maybe she's moving so fast, we're seeing double? No, wait, quintuple," one of Dagan's associates suggested.

"Nope, you're wrong," I said. "Every one of those Nazunas is real, and they each have the same weapon, armor, and power level as the original."

Nazuna's mythical-class weapon, the greatsword Prometheus, had the power to manipulate the world we were living in by bending reality. Or to put it in another way, the Prometheus had the ability to make the impossible possible. This was a good example of what that meant, as the Prometheus had created multiple Nazunas that each possessed the same sword, armor, power level, and even skills, experience, and memories as the original Nazuna. This was the number one reason why Aoyuki and Ellie needed to team up if they wanted to have any hope of beating Nazuna in a mock battle, plus having to fight more than one Nazuna was a big reason why Mei felt she would only be a hindrance to the other two if she made it a three-on-one fight against the Vampire Knight.

The Prometheus was by no means all-powerful, however, and it came with a bunch of limitations. First off, the wielder could only produce four copies of themselves with the same power levels and memories, because any more than that would cause the power levels of the clones and the quality of their weapons to become diluted. The maximum number of copies the Prometheus could produce was one thousand, but each copy would have the minimum power level and weapon quality possible compared to the original. If the wielder were to try to bend reality beyond that, it would negatively affect the user to the point where they might even end up dying as a result.

The reality of its wielder was the easiest thing for Prometheus to bend, but it struggled more with bending the reality of the objects in the wielder's possession. It was tougher still for the Prometheus to bend the reality of any inorganic or magically infused objects, but where the mythical-class sword seriously had difficulties was attempting to bend the reality of another person. To illustrate how tough this was for the weapon, it was all but impossible for the Prometheus to weaken an opponent, lower their power level, or make them submit to commands. I figured Nazuna could potentially do those things to a certain extent if she tried hard enough, but even attempting it would cause too much damage to Nazuna herself to be worthwhile, especially if the opponent was able to resist the Prometheus's powers or if the effect ended up being relatively minor after all of that effort.

To sum up, the Prometheus came with more disadvantages than advantages, so the best way to wield the weapon was to have Nazuna the Level 9999 warrior spawn a limited number of copies of herself to overwhelm her adversary.

"Bring it on, Snakething!" Nazuna and her four clones yelled as one. The five of them furiously hacked and slashed at the mythical-class snake monster with the humongous swords they were all wielding while screaming, "Graaah! Drop dead!"

Snakething hissed violently and tried to escape from the onslaught, but the Nazunas weren't about to let it go anywhere. Instead, the living war machine found itself covered in hundreds of cuts.

"Graaawr! Take this!" one of the Nazunas roared. She landed a powerful blow on one of Snakething's arms, cutting the limb off at the elbow.

"Yes! I finally sliced off a piece of its tough body!" the triumphant Nazuna whooped.

"I'm still in it to win it!" cried another Nazuna.

"No, I'm gonna win it all!" piped up a third.

"Fine! Lessee who smashes this Snakething first!" a fourth said.

"You snooze, you lose!" said Nazuna number five.

Despite the quintuplets' enthusiasm, it turned out it was going to take more than just gusto to defeat Snakething. The monster fired off a bunch of short energy blasts from its remaining snake-arm, and unfortunately, the Nazunas were too close to avoid all of them.

"Yowch!" one of the Nazunas yelled. "That thing just blew off my left arm!"

"I lost my right foot!" cried another.

"I'm made of the toughest stuff in the Abyss," a third Nazuna said in disbelief. "How can it blow chunks off me like that?"

“Guess it ain’t a mythical-class weapon for nothin’,” the fourth one reflected.

“I can’t let that thing attack master and my friends!” yelled the fifth.

Snakething quickly moved in on the injured Nazunas, hissing as if its victory was assured. I looked on in amusement, because I knew it was far too early to declare a winner.

The Nazunas raised their broadswords in unison. “Prometheus! Heal my reality!” they said as one, and all the severed limbs and other injured body parts regenerated until they were as good as new.

Or to be more precise, the Prometheus hadn’t healed Nazuna so much as bent reality in a way that meant the wounds had never existed in the first place. The sword even restored all of the Nazunas’ damaged armor and made it look like they hadn’t even started fighting Snakething yet. If a foe really wished to defeat Nazuna, they would need to kill all five doppelgängers at pretty much the same time, because if even one Nazuna was left standing, she would simply be able to get the Prometheus to bend reality again and revive the other four.

“Okay, all fixed! It’s payback time!” the Nazunas yelled as they rushed at Snakething with their swords swinging. The monster had its back pressed up against a slab, and if it hadn’t been wearing a helmet, I was willing to bet I would’ve seen a face frozen in terror at the utter madness of the Nazunas’ abilities. Its remaining right snake-arm fired off some more short blasts in every direction, but the Nazunas had learned by this point that it was better to just swat away every single blast with their Prometheuses, and once they had done that, the quintuplets quickly got within striking range of the monster.

“I’m first! This thing’s mine!” one Nazuna declared. The SUR Vampire Knight leaped into the air and brought down her sword, but all she ended up doing was cleave in half the slab that the snake monster had been standing in front of only a split second before.

“What the heck? Where’d that Snakething go?” the Nazuna said.

“I saw it get swallowed by that wall!” said another Nazuna.

“So did I!” the third agreed.

“Oh! There it is!” the fourth called out.

“I’ll be the first to get ’im this time!” said the fifth.

Snakething had indeed phased through the slab like some kind of optical illusion, before slithering backward to a location farther away from its attackers. The five Nazunas scampered after the war machine like dogs chasing a squirrel. Snakething saw its opportunity to start firing energy blasts wildly at the Nazunas again and it hissed loudly in an attempt to intimidate its foes. I figured the monster must have been thinking that it stood a better chance if it tried to vaporize the

Nazunas from a distance instead of engaging them in close combat. *Weapons can't make those types of battlefield decisions on their own unless they're intelligent weapons*, I mused. *That lost civilization must have been more advanced than I can even imagine to craft a mythical-class weapon like this.*

It was also worth mentioning that we'd just witnessed Snakething's other ability of phasing through slabs—even these ones that were made out of that impossibly hard material—and the living weapon was using this trick to maintain its distance and keep the rectangular barriers between it and the Nazunas to prevent the quintet from getting close enough to do any damage to it.

“Quit being so chicken and come fight me!” one of the Nazunas yelled.

“You coward! Snake! Centipede!” screamed another.

A third Nazuna turned to the second Nazuna. “Centipede? Really? Is that the best ya got?”

“You talk trash to it, then!” said the fourth.

“Hey, stupid! What're ya doin' aimin' at master like that for?!” the fifth Nazuna yelled.

It looked as though Snakething had decided to send a few of its energy blasts toward where the rest of us were standing in an attempt to distract some of the Nazunas and get them to call off their pursuit. It was a smart move, since three Nazunas had switched gears to bat away energy blasts to protect us. The other two continued chasing after Snakething, but the slabs kept getting in their way.

So it's even smart enough to pull the old “divide and conquer” trick, huh? I thought. This just cemented the fact that the Prometheus wasn't a foolproof weapon and that any foe strong enough could fight Nazuna on a relatively equal footing if they employed the right tactics. Sadly, this development also showed that Nazuna was vulnerable whenever a fight became a battle of wits, as it would have been entirely possible for Nazuna to completely dominate Snakething if she'd only known how to use the Prometheus more intelligently. But on the flip side, I'd hit upon an idea on how to catch Snakething, thanks to Nazuna. The monster may have been able to hold its own against Nazuna, but at the end of the day, we were dealing with an artificial weapon that was giving us way too many hints on how to defeat it.

“Nazuna!” I called out to her. “I'll stop that thing so you can catch it!”

“Whuzzat?” the Nazunas replied, all initially confused. “Okey dokey, master!”

I pulled out a card, tracked the Snakething's movements with my eyes, then anticipated the moment it would phase through a barrier.

“Detonation Inferno—release!”

The exact millisecond the Snakething appeared on the other side of the slab, a flurry of fire bombs and explosions detonated, landing a direct hit on the living weapon and causing it to hiss in shock. The important part was that my attack hadn't passed through Snakething like Suzu's bullets had, and the impact of the explosions had distracted the weapon for long enough to seal its fate.

Yep, that turned out exactly as I expected it to, I congratulated myself internally.

“Way to go, master!” two of the Nazunas yelled as they brought their swords down on Snakething in unison. The other three Nazunas who had been protecting us immediately joined in on the attack.

“L-Lord Light,” Dagan piped up, sounding perplexed. “How come you were able to hit that dratted thing with your attack? No one 'cept that knight girl has been able to even touch that snake!”

Suzu was also gazing at me curiously, wanting to know why my bombs had hit Snakething when her bullets hadn't. I had nothing to hide, so I told them.

“I had a feeling that this artificial monster's abilities lay in its power to etherealize things, including itself,” I said. “So I tested that theory by attacking it.”

Snakething had managed to get within fifty meters of my team without any of the Level 9999s or our top scout Suzu sensing its approach—a feat that would normally be impossible. Furthermore, Snakething was able to smoothly carve craters out of a material that was harder than diamonds, as well as tearing off Nazuna's limbs, and she had the highest defensive stats of anybody I knew. And if that wasn't enough, Snakething could phase through those slabs, which had really clued me in on the nature of its abilities.

“If we assume this mythical-class weapon can demolecularize things, it all makes sense,” I continued. “This thing was able to sneak up on us as well as phase through barriers because it can dematerialize and rematerialize itself at will. It can also repurpose that power into those energy blasts that carve out craters. The reason they're so smoothly cut is because the blasts send that superhard material into the ether.”

Once I'd come up with a plausible theory about its mechanics, it had been easy enough to figure out how to beat it. “Don't get me wrong, etherealizing stuff is a really powerful ability. But that thing isn't able to use it continuously,” I said. “So I just waited until it had phased through a slab before hitting it with my magic. If Snakething had been able to maintain its ethereal state nonstop, it would have simply remained invisible to the eye the whole time and attacked us that way.”

“Y-Yeah, you might be right there,” Dagan said. “I must admit, that explanation makes a lot of sense.”

The other dwarves grunted as they contemplated my theory, then launched into another one of their group discussions. I had also observed that Snakething hadn’t dematerialized when it came under attack, which indicated it couldn’t manipulate reality to protect itself from a weapon of the same class. Just like Nazuna’s Prometheus, the mythical-class weapon guarding this floor wasn’t all-powerful and was riddled with a bunch of vulnerabilities, and what I knew about the Prometheus had been a huge help in figuring out how to fight Snakething. Since Dagan and his dwarves had never seen a mythical-class weapon before, they probably never dreamed Snakething could have any weaknesses.

“Very impressive insight, Master Light,” said Mei.

Mera chortled. “Not even a mythical-class weapon is safe from your powers of deduction, master!”

“You crushed it, Lord Lightmeister,” Jack said. “Good eye, bro!”

Suzu just stared at me with an amazed expression on her face, leaving Lock to speak in her stead. “She says you’re really awesome, Lord Light.”

I chuckled sheepishly at all the adulation I was getting. I hoped they realized the fight wasn’t over *quite* yet, but since I’d figured out the Snakething’s magic trick, there was no reason to carry on standing around, pretending to be astonished by it.

“Detonation Inferno—release!”

Snakething was taking damage from the Nazunas’ concentrated attacks and attempted to flee from them by phasing through a slab, but I hit it with my gacha card the second it rematerialized on the other side of it. That strike halted the living weapon once again, giving the Nazunas the chance to descend on it like vicious raptors.

“Prometheus! Bend the laws of gravity! Maximize weight!” the Nazunas yelled as one. This incantation caused their swords to add an untold number of tons to their individual masses while maintaining their usual appearances. When combined with the arm strength of the Nazunas and the speed of their sword swings, the added weight made for some truly devastating blows. Snakething hiss-screamed in a way that sounded like the dying roar of a mortally wounded animal before the Prometheuses pulverized the artificial monster to pieces in an instant. The force of the combined strikes was so great, the resulting explosion formed a new crater, kicking up a cloud of dust and causing sizable tremors that were almost as strong as full-on earthquakes. Not only did the sound of the blast assault our eardrums, we also had to deal with large chunks of debris hurtling everywhere at high speed. Jack quickly activated his Ironblooded Barricade and shielded the

dwarves from the flying fragments, and the noise the debris made as it bounced off Jack's skintight armor sounded like someone banging a metal drum.

"Thanks, Jack, for guarding King Dagan and the dwarves," I said.

"It's all good. No skin off my back," Jack replied. "It was killer weak standing around forever watchin' that Snakething wildin' out and doing nothing about it."

"I'm sure it was, but that thing was a mythical-class weapon, even if it was artificial," I said. "You had no choice but to stand down."

Even though Jack was a Level 7777 tank, having him shield against those energy blasts might have been a death sentence to him, so while he had been itching to join the fight, the Snakething had simply been too powerful for him.

I looked at the crater the Nazunas had left behind, lost in thought. *If we'd been ordinary adventurers, all of that debris alone would have turned us into mincemeat. I'm sure glad I brought Jack along, for the dwarves' sake. If it hadn't been for Jack's quick thinking, we would've had to scrape bits of Dagan and his crew off the ground. I'm glad Nazuna is as powerful as she is, but she really needs to learn to control her strength.*

I had once assigned Nazuna to fight the leader of the White Knights, Hardy the Silent, in the Great Tower, but if Ellie hadn't cast an automatic regeneration spell on the building and everything inside it, the whole tower would've been destroyed from the inside out, due to Nazuna going overkill, and Hardy would have been extremely dead before we'd gotten the chance to extract any information from him. I'd brought her along on this quest as insurance against any potential dangers we might encounter down here, and as it turned out, I'd made the right call. But if I could ask for anything more from Nazuna, it would be for her to learn to dial down her attacks a little.

Though that wasn't the only bit about Nazuna I wished she would fix. My lieutenant skipped out of the dust cloud, all smiles and in the singular once more. She came running up to me like a puppy returning to her owner, the Prometheus clutched in both hands.

"Master! Master! I won! Do I get a reward—"

Before Nazuna could finish her sentence, I furiously threw my Gungnir in her direction. The staff whistled past her head like a javelin and crushed the intended target: the left snake-arm that Nazuna had sliced off early in the battle. The Gungnir striking it caused the snake-arm to elicit a final hissing scream, before going silent for good. It seemed the Snakething had allowed its left arm to be severed on purpose so that it could be used for one final sneak attack. When Nazuna had turned her back, the arm had suddenly sprung to life and prepared to fire off one last energy blast at her, which was when I reacted. The Gungnir tore through the live snake-

arm and neutralized the final energy blast that was stored in the appendage, before automatically returning to my hand totally undamaged by the etherealizing ball. It was a genesis-class weapon, after all.

Honestly, the trouble with Nazuna being so strong is she lets her guard down too much, I thought. I'd spoken to her on the issue plenty of times before, but my warnings never seemed to get through to her, no matter how much I tried. And because she hadn't learned this particular lesson yet, Nazuna's entire top half would have been demolecularized if I hadn't acted quickly.

I tested my grip on the Gungnir to make sure it was still in one piece before saying my piece. "Nazuna, I know you're very strong, but you shouldn't be so careless, even if you think the battle is won. Even if you crush your opponent, they might try some sneak attack at the very last moment to take you down with them. There are bad guys out there who will save up their trump cards and only use them when they have nothing to lose. You never know what an enemy might be capable of when they're in a desperate situation."

The whole time I was speaking to Nazuna, the innocent smile stretching from ear to ear that she'd had when announcing she'd won remained frozen on her face. In fact, her entire body looked as stiff as a board.

"Nazuna?" I said hesitantly, and a few seconds later, she broke down in tears.



“M-Master, your Gungnir almost hit me in the faaace!” Nazuna sobbed before starting to wail loudly again.

“I-I’m sorry, but I was trying to *save* you!” I said, somewhat rattled. I guess even Nazuna couldn’t handle the thought of the Gungnir coming within a hair’s breadth of touching her. She knew all about the power sealed away inside the nerfed spear, after all.

I ended up spending quite a while stroking Nazuna’s hair and tenderly rubbing her cheeks before she calmed down again.

Chapter 7: End of the Line

Once I'd calmed Nazuna down, I joined the rest of my team in approaching what remained of the Snakething, all of us warily making sure that there were no other traps or surprises that might catch us unawares. The right arm of the mythical-class weapon had been sliced off at the shoulder, while its chest region had been ripped open, armor and all. Inside its chest was an object that looked like its core, which itself had been cleaved in half. The weapon's snake tail had also been sliced off.

This fearsome war machine that we had witnessed causing such destruction only a few minutes earlier had been completely pulverized by the simultaneous strikes of the five Nazunas, each wielding their own Prometheus. The synchronized attack had left a huge, jagged-edged depression in the ground that looked nothing like the smooth craters scooped out by Snakething's energy blasts.

"Lord Light!" Dagan exclaimed, breathing excitedly through his nose. "Is it okay if we touch and examine this mythical-class weapon? Are we allowed to lick it? Maybe even take a bite out of it too?"

That last bit left me momentarily tongue-tied. "It looks like it's stopped moving, so I *believe* it's no longer a threat, but I'll still warn you to take care when approaching it. Oh, and please do *not* put any pieces of it in your mouths, since they may be poisonous and Nazuna might imitate you."

After allowing my permission with these caveats, the three dwarves rushed toward what was left of Snakething. I couldn't blame them for their unbridled enthusiasm, though. Up on the surface world, it would take years of hard work just to forge a relic-class weapon by hand, but in these ruins, we had encountered an artificial mythical-class weapon that had been created by an advanced ancient civilization.

Dagan howled like a wolf as he took a closer look at the remains. "I ain't ever seen an alloy like this in all my born days!"

"Just look at this core!" one of Dagan's associates piped up. "It's made outta a whole bunch of intricate runes stacked on top of each other. No wonder it was able to pull off all those battlefield tactics by itself."

"Lemme see that!" the other associate snapped. "We need to find out how this weapon was able to bend reality like that!"

The dwarves seemed on the verge of getting into another fight, and I couldn't help worrying that they might even start pestering Nazuna about her sword down the line. I figured I should get Nazuna to stay clear of the dwarves, especially given she was still in a bit of a sulk from before. Honestly, they were even starting to give me a bit of a migraine.

Okay, let's focus on the bright side, shall we? I told myself. *At least they still haven't caught on about my Gungnir.* When I'd saved Nazuna from Snakething's severed-but-still-moving left arm, Jack had been shielding the dwarves still, meaning they hadn't gotten a good look at my staff in action. I couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of fuss the dwarves would kick up if they discovered I was in possession of a genesis-class weapon, so I decided it was better to leave them in the dark. All of a sudden, Mera broke out into one of her signature cackles.

"Master, take a look at this," Mera said, handing me a tip of a blade. It looked like it had once been part of an old sword, possibly one that had previously been wielded by a dwarf adventurer that had ventured into these ruins in the distant past.

"One of my spawns returned from scouting the area, master," Mera explained. "It found a hole leading to the next floor, but it didn't look like anyone had tried to go down it. However, my spawn did find this thing near the hole."

"Do you think..." I began.

"Yes, I believe it probably once belonged to a dwarf quester who'd made it all the way down here, going by some of the other evidence found near the sword tip when the spawn spotted it," Mera said.

"They really made it this far down alive?" I said in awe. It looked like the previous parties had made it past the Stone Golems and the artificial sea, but ultimately lost their lives battling Snakething.

"Did they leave anything else behind?" I asked.

Mera cackled again. "Fraid not, master. This was all my spawn could find."

The dead dwarf questers had been sent on top secret missions hundreds of years ago, but despite the time that had passed, I still felt a desire to bring back something for their families and so on to remember them. Unfortunately, all we had found so far was the tip of one sword and very little else. But then, the previous owner of this blade had been facing a living weapon that was able to atomize its targets, so I supposed we were lucky to even find this blade tip in the first place. I decided to inform Dagan and his crew of this discovery with the intention of bringing the relic back up to the surface with us.

"That's too bad, Mera," I said. "Thanks for finding this, though."

"No need to thank me, master," Mera said. "Want me to lead the

way to the hole?”

“Actually...” I said, my gaze landing on the dwarf king and his associates, who were still rollicking amid the Snakething’s remains like kids in a playground. “We should wait until they’ve settled down first. Besides, you need to wait for your other spawns to return, right?”

Mera erupted into raucous laughter once more. “Understood, master.” The two of us joined the rest of my team in searching for traps and watching out for surprise attacks.



It ended up taking a full day for the dwarves to analyze the Snakething’s remains and regain their composure. They had spent the whole night closely studying what was left of the weapon, even commissioning my team to help them to clear out debris as well as put the mythical-class weapon back together like it was some sort of jigsaw puzzle. After all of that effort, the dwarves finally arrived at an undeniable conclusion.

“We have absolutely zero idea how they made this blasted rigamajig!” Dagan announced. “All our modern knowledge just ain’t up to the task!”

I guess it *was* asking a bit too much to break down the advanced technology of a lost civilization in a single day, but I couldn’t help noticing the looks of pure satisfaction plastered across the dwarves’ faces. It was as if they felt that admitting they didn’t have the first idea how Snakething ticked represented progress in and of itself, and they didn’t seem to care one bit that they had worked all day and night in this dangerous environment to come to this rather fruitless realization. I *had* thought I couldn’t be any more astonished by the dwarves’ dedication to research, yet once again, they had proven me wrong. The five other members of my team were similarly dumbfounded by the reaction of Dagan’s crew, but thankfully, nobody flipped out at the dwarves, and we decided it was a good idea to rest up in the cottages before continuing on with our quest.

Once we were well-rested, Mera guided us to the hole one of her wolf spawns had spotted, and Mei lowered us down into the darkness in another of her Magistring gondolas. The passage was every bit as deep and dark as the previous holes, but the scenery that greeted us when we reached the bottom was altogether different.

“Wait, are those homes?” I said, peering out of a window that Mei had opened on my side of the gondola. It did indeed look like we were descending into some sort of residential neighborhood with homes in orderly rows, though certain parts of the estate were buried under black-flecked gravel. The avenues were lined with trees, and the

general impression I got of the place was that it was somewhere that people used to reside peacefully. When the gondola gently touched down on the ground, everybody inside the vessel had an overwhelming sense that we had finally reached the final tier of the ruins. Suzu was the first to step out of the gondola to check for traps and monsters, then everyone else followed once she had confirmed there was no sign of danger. After encountering life-threatening situations on our descent through the ruins, we felt the most at ease we could ever be on this floor. We didn't sense any impending threats, and it felt like people could live perfectly ordinary lives here.

"All I can see is a bunch of sturdily constructed buildings," I said, turning my head this way and that to peer at my surroundings. "Did people once live in them?" Nobody said a word in response, but I could tell they were all thinking the same thing. Even though I felt totally safe here, we still needed to check out what was on this tier.

"Mera, can you do your thing?" I asked.

"Of course, master," Mera chuckled before once again releasing wolf and bird spawns to recon the area. Since it didn't make sense to just stand in one place and wait for Mera's spawns to return, we decided to amble around the neighborhood. The dwarves were naturally the loudest of the group, though I'd come to find this old routine strangely comforting.

"Lord Light! Lord Light!" an expectant Dagan piped up.

"Okay, but don't go running off on your own," I replied with slight exasperation. "Wherever we go, we need to stick together."

Even though I didn't sense any danger, there was no such thing as being too careful. The dwarves led the rest of us to a square-looking building standing just next to us. The building was the size of an ordinary house, though the walls were made of the same near-indestructible black-speckled material we had seen elsewhere.

The door was unlocked when we tried it, so we took the opportunity to go inside, though on entering, we found furniture that looked so normal and recognizable, I wondered if we were actually in the right place, because I'd been expecting to see stuff that was way more advanced and futuristic than what you'd get up on the surface world. We exited the dwelling and inspected some other houses nearby, and they all had similar interiors.

Dagan hummed to himself as he stroked his beard in thought. "Does this mean the ancients kept all of their advanced tech on the other floors?"

"Well, whatever the case, let's go farther into the town," I said. "We might find some different buildings with more unusual stuff to look at."

"Sounds like a plan," Dagan replied, taking the lead once more.

“Let’s hope you’re right on that, Lord Light.”

We soon stumbled across a building that was plainly different from the homes we had inspected. Not only was it taller than the surrounding houses, it had a bell dangling down at the top of it. It looked somewhat similar to the churches of the Goddess on the surface. Given how different it was from the rest of the structures, we decided to take a look inside.

“Okay...” I said almost as soon as I’d walked in through the door. “I guess this is a church.”

Pews were lined up in front of a raised platform, which by the look of it was where sermons were presumably conducted, and there were small windows that let in the artificial sunlight, providing a reasonable amount of brightness in the otherwise dimly lit space. Though it was right behind this platform that we finally found something that really piqued our interest.

“Wow, that’s a *huge* picture!” Nazuna exclaimed.

“Careful, master,” Mera warned. “It’s partially collapsed back there.”

There was a large, striking altarpiece hanging on the wall behind the rostrum, and I took a few steps toward it to get a better look. The artwork depicted individuals from what looked to be all nine races, and they were fighting *something* alongside a bunch of Snakethings. In the middle of it all stood a number of dark-haired humans, who looked like they were commanding this multiracial army.

Are those guys in the middle supposed to be Masters? I asked myself.

This army of Masters(?), fighters from all nine races, and Snakethings were on the left side of the altarpiece, while on the right, there appeared to be an assortment of monsters and creatures that they had engaged in battle. These apparent enemies included dragons, giants, minotaurs, wyverns, fishlike leviathans, and large serpents, though there were also a number of smaller monsters such as goblins, orcs, and insectoids.

Are all of these monsters being spat out of a huge gaping mouth? I thought as I gazed at the huge, gaping maw with jagged teeth on the far right of the picture, which seemed to be where the monsters had rushed out of. The depiction of the mouth was so repulsive, it made me and the rest of my team involuntarily shiver as we peered at it. If you’d told me someone had drawn this section of the picture while glancing across at the actual mouth of the Undergod, I would have believed it.

Unfortunately, the mouth was all we could see of this supreme fiend that was spitting out monsters. Like Mera had said, a bunch of rubble had destroyed the rest of the painting to the right of the mouth, erasing the face that had presumably been attached to those jagged

teeth. The altarpiece had been damaged and chipped away in other parts too, meaning we weren't able to view the whole painting the way it was meant to be seen. I ruled out the possibility of the rubble that had defaced the painting being from Nazuna's battle on the floor above, since the damage didn't look fresh enough for that. The destruction must have been caused when a previous party of dwarf adventurers went up against the Snakething.

Just goes to show how much punch that Snakething packed, I thought. Of course, it might have been a different story if someone were actually controlling Snakething, but since the living weapon was able to move around on its own, I guessed it would be capable of inflicting the kind of indiscriminate destruction that would spill over onto this floor. Though even without the missing sections, what remained of the altarpiece was an impressive artwork in itself.

"I dunno. This painting gives me the creeps," Nazuna said.

"You said it, missy," Dagan agreed. "It spooks me down to the bones."

Nazuna and the dwarves might not have liked the painting, but for me personally, seeing this piece of art had made exploring these ruins worth the effort. It depicted Masters(?) teaming up with all the nine races and the Snakethings to fight an enemy that could unleash a deluge of monsters from its maw. There was no way of knowing quite how powerful this archfiend was, but I strongly suspected that this was evidence that the creature was on the same level as the Masters, if not higher.

I had agreed to explore the ruins because I thought I might find clues about the kind of information the dragonutes and the demonkin were keeping strictly confidential. Then there was the non-Master entity I had been trying to identify, plus the "god" Dagan had mentioned that was possibly behind the destruction of this lost civilization. It was just a hunch, but I believed the missing half of the picture might well have depicted this wicked god.

The door behind us suddenly burst open, and one of Mera's wolf spawns came rushing in. The wolf spawn crawled under Mera's skirt so that it could fuse with her, and Mera took a moment to absorb its memories before cackling and making an announcement.

"Master, my wolf has found buildings that look like archives and treasure repositories," Mera declared.

The dwarves—who had been thoroughly creeped out by the painting—perked up right away on hearing this, their eyes glowing covetously. Mera led us farther into the town, to a section that appeared to be the repositories and archives zone, since I could see at least ten such buildings in this area alone. I guess the part of town we had just left had been the residential area. Our first stop was an

archive building, which looked more like one of those huge libraries I'd heard about in the Principality of the Nine. The structure was as large as a mansion, but inside the shelving had toppled over, with books spilled everywhere. Of course, this didn't stop the dwarves from picking up the nearest books and flipping them open, upon which they immediately gasped at the contents. I was curious enough to pick up a book myself, but it was filled with writing I couldn't decipher immediately. Ruins like these would often contain books written in a language that was somewhat dated but still recognizable, but it appeared this particular book would need a scholar to translate it. However, the book was also filled with detailed drawings that gave me some amusement.

Judging by the illustrations, this book has lots of passages describing those fish monsters we encountered on that sea tier above, I thought. There's the Great White Whale, the flying fish, and even the sawfish. I wonder if this book contains all the types of fish found in that artificial sea.

I flipped through the pages excitedly and eagerly devoured all the diagrams of fish monsters with my eyes. Of course, we couldn't stick around here forever, so we convinced the still-giddy dwarves that we needed to move on to the next location, which turned out to be one of the treasure repositories this time. The term "treasure repository" made me picture some sort of fancy, bank-like place in my head, but the building we made a beeline for was shaped like a square box with a brutally minimalist design like all the others in this zone. There was nothing fancy about the building that I could see, and it seemed to have been built with only sturdiness in mind. Unlike the houses and the archive, I couldn't see anything that looked remotely like an entrance. Mera's wolf spawn hadn't found any ways in either, but it had caught the scent of precious metals from the inside, so it had assumed that the building must hold treasure. The lack of an entrance wasn't a concern, though. After all, if there wasn't one, we'd just have to make one.

"Nazuna, use your Prometheus to cut through these walls," I commanded.

"Okey dokey, master!" Nazuna said, looking happy to have received an order from me. She unsheathed the broadsword on her back, and clutching the hilt with both hands, she plunged the weapon deep into the harder-than-diamond wall before proceeding to use the Prometheus like a saw, slowly but steadily carving an opening for the group.

"Huh? Master, why're ya lookin' at me all funny?" Nazuna asked partway through the task.

"Oh, sorry, was I?" I said quickly. "I was just thankful I had someone like you around, that's all."

Nazuna giggled. “Ya don’t hafta thank me, master. I only wish there was more I could do for ya.”

The Vampire Knight resumed her task all smiles, though I admit, I had been looking at her weirdly. I’d thought she would slice through the wall with a few quick, effortless strokes, like one of those swordmasters you often heard about, so her approach had caught me off guard.

Nazuna eventually finished carving out an opening, and it happened to be in a spot where we were able to get a good look inside, where we found that the building was packed wall-to-wall with all sorts of gold, silver, jewels, and other precious items. I got Nazuna to saw open the next repository over, and found that it held a bunch of swords, shields, armor, staffs, and other magic weapons and items. The dwarves were absolutely beside themselves with exhilaration at the sight, and they immediately started holding up various weapons and pretty much bellowing at them. Oh, and just as a sidenote, the dwarves weren’t nearly as thrilled by the contents of the first repository as they were the second. Nazuna ended up making entrances to all of the repositories, granting us access to each building and making the dwarves feel like they could walk on air, such was their uninhibited bliss at the finds.

“Lord Light, I cannot thank you enough for bringing us all the way down here!” Dagan said to me with a toothy grin. “You got us past those Stone Golems and the artificial sea, and now we’re stumbled upon these archives that are packed to the rafters with secrets of that ancient civilization! And not only that, we found all these repositories that are chock-full of riches! We could never have made these discoveries without you and your retainers! This could completely reshape history as we know it if we were ever to announce what we have found down here! This is the greatest find in dwarven history, and I can’t wait to get researching all this stuff! Rest assured, you’ll be the first to know about any technological discoveries we make, and you can have all of the treasure and weapons, aside from the ones we’ll be analyzing! Starting tomorrow, we’re gonna be doing nothing but research! Yahoo!”

“Uh, glad we could help,” I said, overwhelmed by the Dagan’s verbal diarrhea.

For obvious reasons, I didn’t need any of the treasure or leftover weapons in the repositories—most of which seemed to be on the low to middling end in terms of their class anyway—but I figured we should take them with us anyway, so that the dwarves wouldn’t be tempted to use them to expand their military capabilities. Of course, if we *did* find any powerful weapons in the pile, we intended to have first dibs on them.

“Lord Light, since you’ve kept your promise, it’s time I upheld my side of the deal,” Dagan said, seemingly completely oblivious to my nonplussed reaction. “Here, you can have this.”

“What is it?” I asked as I took the item from Dagan. It appeared to be some kind of golden stamp with a handle that looked like it had a hammer or a pickaxe engraved on it and a snake coiled intricately around the whole length of the grip. The stamp looked like a work of art, but it also seemed rather unwieldy.

“It’s our royal seal,” Dagan said, flashing me a mischievous smile. “It means anything you do will have the total backing of the kingdom. As long as you have that seal and the endorsement of the king, you even have the power to deploy our troops, if you so desire. Me and my associates will of course tell the rest of them that you have the seal. Heck, that thing even gives you the right to be the next king of the dwarves.”

“Wait, I can be the next king?” I asked. “Are you *sure* I should possess something this valuable?”

“Of course,” Dagan said. “It’s the least I can do for you. If you want, you can even take the throne right now.”

“I’m afraid a human like me isn’t exactly qualified to become the king of the dwarves,” I said politely.

“You’re much too modest, Lord Light,” Dagan replied. “What race you are wouldn’t even be an issue, considering this wonderful discovery you’ve helped us make. And if anyone *were* against you taking the throne, all you’d hafta do is buy ’em off with magic items, or crush ’em with your fists, or what have you. But suit yourself. I think you would’ve made a fine king for our nation. ’Tis truly a shame you won’t consider it.”

Dagan might have come across as understanding and halfway reasonable by saying this, but I could tell from the look on his deadly serious face that he would’ve crowned me as king on the spot if I had said I’d wanted that. If I had to guess, the reason Dagan was seemingly so eager to abdicate immediately was so that he could fully concentrate on researching the stuff we had found in these ruins. He was willing to go as far as to give the crown to a human like me just to get his own way, and if I had even joked about accepting his offer, I was in no doubt that the coronation ceremony would have been taking place here and now.

Just like Dagan, I wanted nothing to do with the Dwarf Kingdom’s throne, but I was really glad that I had been given the royal seal as well as Dagan’s support for whatever I chose to do, because this meant I would now have the Dwarf Kingdom’s full backing when it came time to install Princess Lilith as the ruler of the Human Kingdom. Furthermore, my team and I would be able to freely move around the

Dwarf Kingdom in our quest to track down my betrayer, Naano. This meant we had the option of arresting Naano and jailing him for whatever trumped-up charges we saw fit, whether that be rape, treason, or even tax evasion.

“Um, what’s wrong, Lord Light?” Dagan asked while I stood there, deep in thought. “Are you sore about something I said?” I guessed I must have been brooding too much on how I would get my revenge on Naano, because Dagan had gone positively pale. I quickly assured Dagan that he wasn’t at fault, but I couldn’t stop thinking about how I was going to use the royal seal to get my own back on Naano.



Since we were all done exploring the ancient ruins, I showed Dagan the fragment of sword Mera’s spawn had found on the floor above and relayed my idea for bringing it back up to the surface with us to use it for a symbolic burial ceremony. My idea was that it would commemorate the deceased adventurers, though I suspected there wouldn’t be any surviving relatives, since the deaths had probably occurred centuries ago. From one perspective, burying a sword tip up on the surface world wouldn’t really mean a whole lot, and it may have just been an act of pretension on my part, but I still wanted to honor these fallen dwarf questers in some way, rather than leaving this sword fragment lost and forgotten, deep in these ruins. Since the Dwarf Kingdom had been keeping this place a secret for centuries, I needed to ask Dagan’s permission first before going through with my idea, but he readily agreed.

“Sure, whatever floats your boat, Lord Light,” Dagan said with a tender smile on his face. “In fact, I’ll bet those same adventurers are rejoicing right now, wherever they ended up.”

I thanked Dagan for his kind words. It seemed odd to me that the dwarves could have such a massive range of personalities, from the downright evil like Naano, to the kindhearted souls like Dagan. Of course, the dwarf king then immediately got into an argument that somewhat shattered my good impression of him.

“Okay! Now that’s all settled, I’m just going to stay down here and get on with some research!” Dagan declared.

“Oh no you don’t!” one of his associates retorted. “You still have work to do up on the surface, *Your Majesty!* You’d better hop on the next gondola out of here and leave the two of us down here to take care of the research side of things!”

“Who gives a mangy dog’s behind about my work as a king?!” Dagan roared. “Maybe it’s *you two* who should go on home and leave me with all this miraculous stuff that’s been discovered!”

“Over our dead bodies!” said one associate.

“We’d sell our own families and drown ourselves in debt just to stay here and do research!” the other piped up.

“Then you danged well know how *I* feel!” Dagan bellowed. “Now keep my royal duties outta this, and lemme stay here and do some *real* work!”

Dagan had instantly transformed from a magnanimous monarch to a fussy baby right before my very eyes, and it seemed the other dwarves weren’t going to budge on the matter either. In fact, Dagan’s crew looked like they were *enjoying* seeing Dagan grappling with the dilemma of carrying out his duties as the king and his desire to stick around to do research in the ruins. Of course, Dagan responded by digging in his heels even more, and yet again, the argument devolved into a fistfight. Seriously, why couldn’t Dagan’s advisers do a better job of advising?

Suzu stared at the dwarves in wordless shock, while Nazuna watched the fight with a worried expression on her face.

“M-Master, shouldn’t we stop them?” asked Nazuna.

By this point, I’d gotten so used to how the dwarves operated that I just sighed and told my people to stand down. “Suzu, Nazuna, just ignore them. We should concentrate on making sure this place is free of traps and monsters.”

Although my two allies still looked rather perturbed, they obediently followed my orders and went back to the task I had set for them, leaving the dwarves to continue talking with their fists.



Once the dwarves had sorted out their differences by beating the snot out of each other, they arrived at a compromise of sorts, where Dagan agreed to return to the surface—since his first priority *was* to attend to his royal duties—while his associates agreed not to engage in any research right away, since the ruins were still *technically* a state secret and they needed to do the proper groundwork before starting on any deep-dive analysis. The exact arrangement in which that research would end up taking place would be a subject of future horse trading.

While the dwarves were having their *extremely* heated discussions, Mera retrieved the rest of her spawns, and their memories confirmed that there were no more traps or monsters on the present floor and that this was indeed the final tier, with no other holes descending downward. My team combed through the buildings for any useful magic weapons, items, and books we could take with us, and because of the amount of work involved in this task, we’d had to set up camp for the entire day. During that time, the dwarves were—perhaps unsurprisingly—too busy examining their surroundings to either eat or

sleep.

When everything was said and done, all we found were a modest number of low-class magic weapons and items. Our findings matched my initial hunch that this floor was simply a residential area that had been a place of shelter for the ancient civilization. We found low-level weapons in the houses too, which were apparently used for self-defense. As for the dwarves... Well, when they eventually got tired of investigating all the buildings on this tier, their attention shifted to the one thing I had feared most.

“Missy! Hey, miss! Lemme see your sword, just for a wee second!” Dagan called out to Nazuna.

“Leave me alone! Go away!” Nazuna shouted at him. “Or else I’ll tell master!”

The dwarves were practically prowling around Nazuna just to get a chance to analyze the Prometheus, and the Level 9999 Vampire Knight was on the verge of tears as she fearfully backed away from Dagan’s crew, so I intervened and told the dwarves to leave her alone.

“Thanks, master! You’re so super awesome!” Nazuna said to me afterward, flashing an expression that suggested she respected me even more now, if that were possible. I was flattered, but I hadn’t really done much to deserve her excessive praise.

Though that was all beside the point. What was important was that we had finished our quest. I used an SSR Teleportation card on my team and the dwarves to whisk us away from the ruins, though I left Mera behind so that she could collect up all the remaining spawns she had left behind in the artificial sea. Once she was done, she too would warp herself back to the Abyss using her own Teleportation card.

Our first port of call afterward was the western port city, so that the three dwarves could reunite with the visiting royal delegation that had been their cover for this little excursion. Dagan would later establish a place where his people could research books, magic weapons, and other items that had been found in the ruins. My team took custody of all the valuables and the more powerful of the weapons after informing Dagan that was what we were going to do, and that was how we left it, though I predicted that I’d later enter into some sort of arrangement where I’d lend some Teleportation cards to the dwarves so their researchers could easily shuttle back and forth between the bottom floor of the ruins and the surface world. Dagan and I had already come to the conclusion that building a research facility deep inside the ruins would be much better for keeping the place a secret than if a similar facility were built on the surface near the entrance. Plus, warehousing all of those books and magic items on the surface world risked attracting unwanted attention from the

dragonutes and demonkin. So for these reasons, I imagined the dwarves would most likely take all the things they needed to be able to conduct their research for the long haul down to the bottom tier of the ruins.

Dagan promised we would be the first to be told the results of the dwarves' research. He also kept mumbling about how he wanted to abdicate from the throne and throw himself into the research project personally. I didn't think Dagan would shout about the discovery from the hilltops, since the ruins were supposed to be top secret, but I didn't attempt to pry into his feelings on it all, because I figured that'd open up a whole can of worms that just wasn't worth it.

When my team and I finally returned to the Abyss, I was too tired for anything else, so I dismissed everyone, went to my private room, and flopped down on my bed.

"How can looking after three dwarves be so exhausting?" I complained under my breath. "I'm totally worn out, both physically and mentally. But at least I've seen evidence of a powerful non-Master being, and the Dwarf Kingdom will support me in whatever I do. Now I don't have to worry about the dwarves interfering in my revenge plot against Naano, since I can turn the whole nation against him if I decide to."

That said, I still hadn't thought about how *exactly* I was going to get my revenge on Naano, and I wanted this plot to be every bit as delicious as the revenge I'd gotten on Sasha the elf, if not more so. I rolled back and forth in my bed, trying to dream up the best way to make sure Naano got his just deserts.

Chapter 8: Testing the Blade

At the manor that had been built just outside the Dwarf Kingdom's royal capital, the night air echoed with the clangs of hammer on metal. The sounds were coming from the manor's first-floor smithing workshop that contained all the tools of the trade: mallets, anvils, and a furnace, to name but a few. The space would have been no different from a normal smithy if it weren't for the dead humans that were piled up against the walls on both sides of the room. There were easily more than a baker's dozen of corpses, and each lifeless body had gaping holes gouged out of them where their hearts should have been. There wasn't a single human left alive waiting to be the next victim. The grisly scene resembled the abode of a serial killer. But the dwarf responsible for this carnage—Naano—hadn't killed these humans out of hate or some sick, bloodthirsty pleasure. No, the dead humans were simply ingredients for making a legendary weapon, in the same way that monster parts were routinely used to forge weaponry. Occasionally, Naano would rip out the hearts of his victims while they were still breathing and conscious, but to him, they were nothing more than a weapon-making material.

Naano kept hammering away at the weapon as the heat from the furnace blasted in waves against his sweaty body. Once he was done pounding the glowing blade, Naano dipped the weapon into a bucket of water that had blood and alchemy chemicals mixed into it, and the resulting plume of steam hissed as all the heat rapidly escaped. The dwarf had repeated this process countless times and for countless hours that day, but now Naano inspected the weapon one last time.

"All finished," he whispered as he gripped the double-edged sword tightly in his large, sweaty hand. The dark, reddish blade was made of steel and alchemy chemicals, and it was attached to a hilt made of bone and covered in hair, which served as a nonslip grip. Even the scabbard for the sword was covered in human skin pulled taut. Although the sword and scabbard were of a simple design, the weapon gave off an ominous aura guaranteed to strike fear into any who saw it. As a blacksmith and an adventurer, Naano had handled all sorts of weapons down the years, so he was able to tell when he had a magical artifact-class weapon in his hands, even though he didn't possess the Appraisal skill.

Naano let out a series of chuckles that started out as gravelly

grunts, before crescendoing into reedy titters, and climaxing in a drawn-out wheeze. “I ain’t even a mage, yet I’ve just created a magic weapon all by myself! Me!”

In this world, people were only capable of artificially making relic-class weapons, but Naano had just forged a weapon that was one class above that. Furthermore, artifact-class weapons were so rare, only A-ranked and S-ranked adventurers were known to wield them. Of course, Naano couldn’t have done it without the Book of Forbidden Weapons, but the dwarf couldn’t help chuckling with self-satisfaction at his feat.

Naano swung the sword at the nearest target to hand: a desk that was easily cleaved in two by the blade. His next swings chopped chunks off the cadavers, before he decided to test the blade on the stone floor beneath him, which smoothly separated upon impact. Naano inspected the blade and saw that it had suffered no chips or dents from his wild swings, and this discovery made him burst out in crazed, raucous laughter.

“I’m absolutely brilliant, I tell you! *Brilliant!*” Naano roared. “The Goddess herself gave birth to a blacksmithing wizard! She sent me into this world to produce the next legendary weapon!”

A forbidden weapon would often be laced with a curse that either shortened the life span of the user, required innocent blood to be shed, or drove the wielder stark raving mad. Unfortunately, Naano didn’t have the kind of resistance stats that would help him to avoid such a fate.

“No, it’s not enough. Not *nearly* enough...” Naano babbled as he held the dark blade up in front of him. “There ain’t no goddamn point chopping up inanimate objects and dead bodies with this sword. I need to test this baby on some living, *breathing* people to know its real value...”

Naano contemplated his decision for a few minutes before resheathing the sword in its scabbard. He exited the smithy and went to his room to retrieve the old gear he had worn in his adventuring days. He also threw on a cloak with a hood to better disguise his identity.

“This is a necessary sacrifice to make sure that I have really forged a legendary weapon,” Naano muttered once he was ready to go out. “No, anyone would surely *rejoice* at giving their lives for the sake of this new mythic sword.”

There was nobody around to tell Naano that he had gone completely insane, and there was nothing stopping the dwarf from talking himself into committing murderous acts, so Naano stole out of the manor with the intention of trying out this artifact-class sword on some live victims. The expression on his face didn’t betray even an

ounce of remorse for his actions, only the dark urge to ascertain the power of his newly created ultimate weapon.



What Naano didn't know was that a pair of eyes in the immediate vicinity were tracking his movements, and they belonged to the man who had sold the dwarf the Book of Forbidden Weapons in the first place.

"It would appear he could not wait to find out what his new weapon is really capable of," Cavour mused to himself as he watched Naano disappear off into the night. "The curse of the forbidden sword has completely overtaken him, bewitching him so that he follows his actions to their logical conclusion. I do find myself wondering what will result from his decision, and whether the repercussions will be worth everything I have invested in this project. In all honesty, I wish I could receive more help with it, but given our shortage of manpower, I would be wise to keep such impractical demands to myself."

Although Cavour was sure Naano had ventured off to slaughter innocent people, he didn't think to warn the soldiers on patrol in the city of the crime that was about to take place. Instead, Cavour simply shrugged at the direction events were taking, since the lives soon to be lost did not particularly matter in the larger scheme of his goals. After watching Naano disappear into the distance, Cavour himself melted back into the shadows, leaving no trace of his presence behind.

Chapter 9: Roadway Killer

“What in the world is going on?”

This remark was uttered by me as I read through the latest intel on Naano in my office in the Abyss. After helping Dagan explore the vast underground ruins, the king of the dwarves had given me a royal seal that would enable me to have Naano arrested for any made-up crime I could dream up, and I’d been racking my brain over the best way to use the seal to get my revenge on my sworn enemy when this new information had suddenly made my need for a plan much more urgent than I had anticipated.

“Naano’s been killing random people in the Dwarf Kingdom capital?” I asked. “What the heck would make him do *that*?”

I had been under the impression that Naano was now one of the elite in dwarven society, after landing a highly coveted job at a famous blacksmith. Even if we were to assume that Naano hadn’t found that cushy job particularly fulfilling for some dumb reason, being in a professional rut was a pretty run-of-the-mill problem, and certainly not one that would transform a serious craftsman like Naano into a serial killer all of a sudden. That didn’t make a lick of sense.

“Naano only started killing random people on the streets recently,” Iceheat informed me. The UR Level 7777, Frozen Firestorm Grappler was standing in front of my desk and looking as prim and proper as ever in her maid outfit. “It appears he has obtained a new sword and has taken to attacking adventurers and other dwarves at night as a way of testing out the blade.”

I had left Iceheat in charge of the Abyss’s day-to-day affairs while my team and I were off exploring the ruins, which was why she was the one briefing me on the latest intelligence on Naano instead of Mei.

“Do we know anything about this new sword that has come into Naano’s possession?” I inquired.

“As far as Miss Aoyuki has been able to gather from the familiars doing the surveillance on Naano, the sword can be accurately described as ‘very creepy,’” Iceheat said matter-of-factly. “The weapon appears to be powerful enough to slice cleanly through the weapons and armor of the adventurers Naano has slain, and what’s more, Naano has been impaling his victims with his sword and leaving it in at length so that the weapon can absorb the resulting blood. Even from a distance, it was obvious that Naano was not of sound mind,

and Miss Aoyuki believes there is a strong possibility that the sword is a forbidden weapon.”

“A forbidden weapon? That would mean the sword is cursed,” I mused. “But where would Naano get a sword like that? I thought every nation in the world had banned such weapons, so it couldn’t have been easy to come by.”

I’d heard Naano talking about forbidden swords back when I was traveling with the Concord of the Tribes. He had told me they were really powerful weapons, but the price of owning one was much too high. First off, anyone caught with one of these taboo swords would almost certainly be executed for possessing it, and if that wasn’t enough, simply touching one for too long could cause insanity, shorten your life span, or hypnotize you into attacking your comrades. There were simply too many drawbacks to owning a forbidden sword for a normal adventurer. I’d even heard about plans long ago to punish enslaved criminals by giving them forbidden swords and forcing them to clear out dungeons and fight monsters, but this idea was eventually scrapped because as soon as the slaves had the weapons in their hands, they refused to listen to orders. The slaves would end up attacking each other, or even their handlers, and it usually resulted in a high body count. In other words, forbidden swords were nothing but trouble. Yet Naano owned something *that* self-destructive?

“We immediately looked into the possibility that Naano had indeed obtained a forbidden sword,” Iceheat said, as if reading my mind. “I cannot guarantee how precise this raw intelligence is, but we have compiled what we have discovered and included it in the next report.”

I scanned the second set of documents in front of me. “Naano forged the sword himself?”

“It seems that way, though it is merely conjecture at this stage,” Iceheat replied.

The quest to explore the ruins had occupied so much of my attention lately that gathering intelligence on Naano hadn’t been particularly high on my list of priorities so long as he stayed put in the Dwarf Kingdom. But according to Iceheat’s report, Naano had quit his job at the prestigious blacksmith and moved to a manor he had bought on the outskirts of the royal capital. But the move didn’t look like it had been prompted by Naano getting tired of working and deciding to live out the rest of his days on the reward money he’d received for his part in the assassination attempt on me. Even before going on his killing spree, Naano had cooped himself up in his manor house, never leaving it at any point, and the only person who had visited his new home was one solitary human merchant. This man

appeared to supply Naano with food and his other daily necessities, as well as the ironstone, alchemy ingredients, and other materials needed for smithing. The report said that this merchant had also been supplying Naano with human slaves.

“It appears the slaves were kept hidden from view in large barrels,” Iceheat explained. “Neither I myself nor my colleagues could make much sense of this development at first, but we have now come to the conclusion that these slaves have been used as ingredients in forging this forbidden sword.”

My brow furrowed wordlessly as I tried to figure out how in the world Naano had been able to craft a forbidden sword in the first place. Whatever the case, I couldn’t think of a nongrisly way in which human slaves could be used as “ingredients.”

Who would have guessed that Naano would craft a forbidden sword with his own two hands? Though I did remember one occasion during my time with the Concord of the Tribes when Naano mentioned over drinks that he desired to forge a legendary weapon. Naano had been so passionate about the topic that his eyes had twinkled like a kid’s as he gushed about these weapons, even though his expression could only be described as gruff the rest of the time. I’d been totally convinced at the time that the reason he had joined the Concord of the Tribes in the first place was to get his hands on the material he needed to make a legendary weapon.

And now it looked like Naano had been willing to do something completely verboten to make his dream come true. I’d heard the myths about heroes who were strong enough to brandish forbidden weapons without being affected, but here in the real world, such weapons usually ended up cursing their wielders. That was the reason all the nations of the world had banned these weapons. I’d never expected Naano to go as far as forging a forbidden weapon himself.

But this new information about Naano using human slaves to craft a forbidden weapon had jogged my memory. I had now settled on the best way to get my revenge on Naano, which would not only plunge the dwarf into a deep pit of despair, but also bring an end to his murderous rampage.

I grinned inwardly as Iceheat continued with her briefing. “Miss Aoyuki also mentioned that something seemed strange about the human merchant, so we expanded the operation to probe into him as well.”

“And? Did you find out anything weird about him?” I asked.

“No, he appears to be a perfectly normal man,” Iceheat replied. “However...”

“He’s *too* normal,” I said, finishing the thought for her.

“Precisely,” said Iceheat. “His profile was so impeccable, it was as

if it had been manufactured in a way that would ward off investigators.”

I paused to ponder this assessment. Aoyuki had been so weirded out by the merchant that she hadn’t sent her familiars to spy on him, allowing him to operate freely outside of our web of surveillance. *Aoyuki was able to tell something was fishy about that guy through her telepathic familiars*, I thought, cupping my chin with my hand. *Yet this guy is so clean, he squeaks when you run a dish towel over him. I suppose we’ll have to watch out for this human merchant too.*

I decided I would have to talk to Aoyuki face-to-face to hear her thoughts on our mystery man.

“Iceheat, please schedule a meeting with Aoyuki. I’d like to discuss the matter of Naano’s merchant with her,” I said. “We have to stop Naano from killing any more people, and we may have to include this merchant in my revenge plot against Naano.”

“As you command, Master Light,” Iceheat replied with a bow. “I will contact her immediately.”

And with that, my quest to finally get retribution on Naano had officially gotten underway.

Chapter 10: The Fear Sword

The pitch-black night lay like a shroud over the royal capital, the darkness only interrupted by the scattered patches of light cast from taverns where drunken revelers were still merrily quaffing. The laughter and chatter of the ale-sotted dwarves who remained in these establishments barely rose above a whispering hum when heard from outside in the otherwise quiet streets—the same roadways that were a raucous din of voices during daylight hours. Banks of cloud hung low in the sky, blotting out the moonlight and making the footpaths too cast in shadow for a human to follow them without stumbling. Dwarves, however, were better adapted to the darkness, and were able to navigate their way down the gloomy streets without too much trouble, though most dwarves knew better than to wander the city late at night, unless in groups.

But Naano was an exception to this rule, and he was presently lying in wait in the shadow of an alleyway, watching the main street for his next victim. A hood was pulled down over his face, and he lovingly stroked the artifact-class forbidden sword secreted inside his cloak. *It won't be long now, my lovely Fear Sword,* Naano thought. *I'll get you more lifeblood to suck up soon enough.*

Over the past several days, Naano had been targeting people unlucky enough to be spotted walking the streets alone. Even though most folk knew it wasn't safe to be wandering around alone at night and thought better of it, there were always a handful of souls that didn't follow this rule of thumb, and those were the ones Naano targeted. His victims were generally people who had failed to think twice about risking a nighttime stroll, or folk who were either too drunk or too young and reckless to make better decisions. Though at times, Naano encountered skilled adventurers who would normally have nothing to fear from muggers.

To date, no one had been able to escape the deadly Fear Sword, which was the name Naano had given it after witnessing the sword's power to instill unbridled terror into anyone who laid eyes on it. This granted Naano an incalculable advantage, because fear almost always proved fatal in battle. Those seized by panic could no longer demonstrate whatever combat skills they possessed, could not hit a target, and if they were a mage, they found themselves unable to recite the incantations they had memorized.

After slaying his victims, Naano would absorb their blood using the sword, which to his eyes, appeared to boost the fear-inducing effects of the weapon, and this was why he was searching for his next victim. He wanted to enhance this ability on the Fear Sword.

Guess I've been spilling too much blood around these parts, 'cause I haven't seen any good marks all night, thought Naano. *All the people who have passed me have been traveling in groups, which is no good.*

Naano's serial killings had been the talk of the town, and citizens had started taking more precautions, which had further reduced the number of people on the streets at night. The only people Naano had seen from his vantage point in the alleyway were the occasional patrolman and folk walking in pairs or trios.

Naano sighed inwardly. *I need to feed my Fear Sword some lifeblood pronto so it can develop into the ultimate legendary weapon. Maybe I'll have more luck finding a vagrant over in the slums.*

But Naano suddenly perked up at a sight that chased away his disappointment. A short, solitary figure in a hooded cape was strolling down the thoroughfare. *Oh, wait! Is that a human boy?* Naano wondered. *Twelve, maybe thirteen? Or could it be a dwarf?*

Even though no moonlight filtered through the clouds and it was all but pitch-black, the figure was sure-footed and had a relaxed, carefree gait, as if they had a destination in mind. Naano was an adventurer with a power level north of 300, and had battled monsters and survived life-and-death situations on countless occasions. With all that experience under his belt, he could tell this hooded figure was a trained warrior who would be able to expertly repel a surprise attack.

At first, Naano assumed the passerby was a human who may or may not have been a preteen, but the dwarf reasoned that it didn't make much sense for a human that age to be walking the streets of this city alone at night. The figure couldn't have been a dragonute, a demon, an oni, a beastman, or a centaur, because either a tail would have been peeking out from underneath the hem of their cloak or horns would have revealed themselves in the contours of the hood. Since juvenile elves and young dark elves wouldn't be wandering the capital at night either, by the process of elimination, the figure could only have been an adult dwarf, likely an adventurer returning home after a night of boozing. Naano licked his thick lips with his bright red tongue and chuckled inwardly. *Looks like I got myself some fresh blood.*

Naano slipped farther back into the darkness of the alleyway, making sure not to give chase immediately, but keeping tabs on his next victim all the same. The cloaked figure paused briefly before heading in the direction of the slums. *Why's this guy going to the slums?* Naano thought. *Wait, doesn't that route lead to all the inns?*

You could take a shortcut through the slums to get from the

taverns to the part of the city where all the inns were, but the high risk of getting hassled meant most citizens never ventured anywhere near the slums, even in the daytime, which only made the cloaked figure an even better target. This realization caused Naano to immediately relax and drop his guard—so much so, in fact, that he had to quickly cover his mouth to stifle a laugh. *Goddess almighty, aren't I lucky?* Naano thought. *She must have really blessed this legendary blacksmith by sending a literal lamb to the slaughter!*

Naano used all of his Level 300 skills to skulk swiftly through the shadows to head off his intended victim, making sure not a single one of his footsteps was audible, nor even taking a breath that might tip off his target. Since Naano knew the area well, secretly slipping past the cloaked figure and finding a choke point to block their path was a piece of cake. Naano unsheathed the Fear Sword from its human-skin scabbard—the blade glinting a dark red even though there was no light to reflect—and waited for the hooded figure. After a few minutes, the figure happened upon the dwarf awaiting him and stopped a few meters away from Naano, whose eyes widened in surprise as he finally got a better look at his intended victim.

“I thought you were a dwarf adventurer who’d stayed way past happy hour at a bar somewhere,” Naano said. “Son, are you really a human?”

The wanderer remained silent, and the dwarf noted that he was holding a staff and wearing a mask in addition to the hooded cloak. It was because of this getup that Naano had been unable to determine the race of the passerby when he’d first spied him from the alleyway, but from his present vantage point, Naano could see that he had the slight build of a human rather than the stout frame of a dwarf. On top of that, he was so short, even Naano had a height advantage over him, which suggested that the dwarf was raising his sword to a human child.

“So what’s a human kid like you doing wandering around outside this late at night?” Naano mused, stroking his beard. “Out buying food for an older partymate? If that’s how it is, it just goes to show you humans are too damned stupid to know you’re not supposed to be out alone this late.”

The corners of Naano’s mouth twisted upward into a grin as he thought about all the fun he was about to have torturing this helpless kid to death. Knowing he would get to feed the Fear Sword some more lifeblood to boost its powers only added to his exhilaration.

“Only a second-rate—no, a *third-rate* adventurer would go bumming around these streets at this hour. You never know when a hoodlum might slit your throat open. Like this!”

As soon as he’d said the last two words, Naano dashed forward,

thrusting his sword toward the hooded figure. Even though the human kid seemed surprised at how swiftly Naano moved for a dwarf, the boy gripped his staff with both hands and assumed a defensive stance. Naano roared with laughter because he knew the kid didn't stand a ghost of a chance against him and the Fear Sword's ability to strike terror into the heart of its opponent. There was nothing to prevent the boy from becoming paralyzed with dread, which would leave him wide open for Naano to strike him down. This pattern had repeated itself time and time again over the long line of adventurers—human and dwarf alike—that Naano had previously slain. *This sword will cut through any normal weapon and armor like butter!* Naano thought as he closed in. *One quick slash is all it'll take to feed my pride and joy tonight!*

Naano swung the sword at the boy with the entirety of his Level 300 strength, but to his shock, the boy blocked it with his staff and simultaneously kicked the dwarf in the midsection. Thanks to his questing experience, Naano managed to lessen the force of the kick by leaping backward at the very last second, but due to the cloaked figure's superior speed, the blow still connected, making the dwarf grunt in pain. Naano clutched his abdomen as his brow scrunched in agony. *Dammit! How's that staff still in one piece? Must be a higher-class weapon, I reckon. And the kid doesn't seem affected by the Fear Sword at all either. Surely he can't be tougher than the average human weakling, is he?*

Naano was incensed that his target wasn't showing any fear, and his fury at that fact eclipsed his surprise at the durability of the staff. Back in the alleyway, Naano had thought this passerby had the gait of someone tough, but he never imagined his target would be at a level where he could resist the Fear Sword's ability to strike fear into people's hearts. Naano was aware, however, that forbidden swords didn't work on people over a certain power level, so he started thinking it through logically. Naano wouldn't be able to defeat his opponent using his usual methods, but he couldn't just allow this boy to escape and report him to the authorities, because then he would no longer be able to feed lifeblood to his Fear Sword. Not in this city, at any rate.

But when the boy spoke for the first time, Naano completely forgot about this picayune worry. "You may be an expert blacksmith now, but I see your combat skills haven't changed much after all these years," the boy said.

"What? No! It *can't* be you!" Naano cried out. "Y-You're still *alive?!'*"

Before the boy replied, he lowered his hood and removed his mask so that Naano could finally get a good look at his face after three long years.

“It’s been a long, long time, Naano,” Light said. “But I’m back from the Abyss and I’m here to take my revenge.”



I took off my SSR Fool’s Mask so that I could properly greet my sworn enemy, Naano, who practically screamed in astonishment on seeing me still alive and—in a very literal sense—kicking.

“I-Is that really you, Light?!” Naano cried.

“In the flesh,” I said. “Not an illusion or a look-alike. And I don’t have a twin brother either.”

“B-B-But we haven’t seen each other in three years, and despite that, you haven’t grown one godforsaken *inch!*” Naano shrieked.

“You’re a human! You’re supposed to be experiencing growth spurts by now! You can’t *still* look like the same kid I knew all those years ago!”

“I stopped myself from growing up as a way to remember the pain from the day you and the rest of my party tried to get rid of me like I was garbage,” I said. “I didn’t want to forget how much I yearned to get payback on all of you for betraying me.”

By this point, my words oozed enough pent-up rage that Naano was convinced I was the genuine article.

“Well, seems like you *are* the real Light, and not some illusion,” Naano said. “And you headed straight for the slums just to bait me into attacking you, I’m guessing?”

“Correct. Thanks for walking right into my trap,” I sneered. “It took everything I had not to burst out laughing as I watched you going to all that effort just to head me off here.”

Naano covered his face with his left palm while his right still gripped the sword. Maybe he was steamed at getting lured into a trap so easily, or maybe he was starting to regret his act of betrayal, now the tables had turned.

“I see. So you survived the Abyss, huh?” Naano muttered quietly. “I’ve had nightmares about that day and how they all tried to do away with you. I’ve often found myself asking why I chose to be a bystander instead of stopping the others.”

This unexpected response from the dwarf set a train of thought in motion in my head. *Wait, does Naano really regret what he did? Well, it’s true he didn’t personally get involved in the attack on me, but...*

The idea that Naano might really have turned over a new leaf only lasted for a second, though, before I dismissed the possibility entirely. The evil aura emanating from Naano didn’t match what was coming out of his mouth, so I found myself waiting for the other shoe to drop. Naano slowly lowered his hand from in front of his face to reveal the gleeful, sadistic look of someone about to pull the wings off

a fly.

“Yeah, I’ve always regretted not stopping the others from killing you, ’cause I wanted to do you in myself! And only *after* I’d made you suffer like a dog!” Naano thundered. “I joined the Concord of the Tribes to search for a Master who’d help me to craft a legendary weapon. Instead, we found you, an utterly worthless, two-faced phony! They wouldn’t let me join another Master-hunting party, so I was shit out of luck after that!”

Naano eyes grew wider, revealing capillaries fully engorged with blood. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve dreamed about killing you?! Leaving you down there to be monster food was too good a fate for a corn-fed squirt like you! I wanted to torture you and make you scream and beg for a quick death that was never gonna come to you!”

By this point, Naano was flecking spittle everywhere like a rabid pit bull. Even if I hadn’t been able to hear his words, I would have been able to tell how much he loathed me just by looking at his face.

“My dreams of becoming a legendary blacksmith were this close—*this* close!—to being buried under a life of mediocrity because of one little shitstick of a human!” Naano yelled, then he let out a long hoarse howl to emphasize his ire.

“Every time my mind goes back to that day, it makes me wanna vomit!” Naano spat, picking up where he’d left off. “Why did your parents conceive you in the first place?! Why didja live long enough for us to find you?! Why couldn’t you have died in a ditch instead of causing me so much goddamn pain and misery?!”

Naano had been bellowing so loud and for so long that he had to stop for more than a few seconds in order to catch his breath, his shoulders heaving. Once he had recovered, the corners of his lips once again curled upward into an ugly grin.

“But thankfully, the Goddess recognized my brilliance and sent me a boon in the form of the Book of Forbidden Weapons,” Naano said calmly, then raised his sword. “That’s how I was able to achieve my lifelong dream of crafting this legendary sword! That’s right! I’m a superstar! I’m now a world-famous blacksmithing maestro!”

The sword Naano was holding up proudly was of a simple design, though it had a dark blade with a tinge of red in it, and the hilt looked like it was covered in hair. Just looking at the sword was seriously making my skin crawl, but Naano had a rapt look on his face, as if he was holding up a rare work of art.

“Keep looking at it, boy! Look upon this Fear Sword that I crafted myself!” Naano squealed. “This godly beaut will soon be the stuff of legend! Now that I have this gem, I’ll overlook all the suffering you’ve put me through. So long as you feed the Fear Sword, that is!”

“You seriously think you’re going to kill me with that junk sword?” I said, unimpressed. “Aren’t you forgetting who lured you into this trap?”

Naano tittered like a lunatic as he assumed a fighting stance, and after giving the dwarf a dirty look, I refixed my Fool’s Mask and gripped my staff with both hands.

“You’re too much of a pea-brain to trick me, kid!” Naano yelled at me. “After all, there’s no one here but you and me! If you really wanted to spook me, you should’ve at least brought some backup with you!”

Naano darted toward me brandishing the sword, but I coolly gauged the angle of his swing and blocked the blade with my staff.

“You can’t fool me!” Naano shouted as he rained hit after hit down on my staff. “The only things stopping you from losing your wits altogether are this staff and that mask of yours! You probably have a bunch of other magic items on you too! Like that bracelet on your wrist!”

I feigned stumbling backward in shock as if he had hit upon something big, and right on cue, Naano ramped up the intensity of his attacks, fueled by his confidence that he had guessed right.

“You lucked out in the Abyss by tripping that teleport trap, and it sent you someplace where you picked up that staff and mask, didn’t it?” Naano roared at me. “Then you spent the next three years waiting for your chance to strike back at me. But you’re still weak! I’m a Level 300 dwarf, and you’re just a piece of human dregs! What’s more, my brilliance created this legendary Fear Sword! You must be outta your mind if you think you can beat me! You! Piddling! Sonuvabitchin’! Piece! Of! Shit!”

Naano punctuated each epithet with a bash of his sword on my staff, and followed up by sniggering with wild abandon after each strike. But from where I was standing, I could easily tell that Naano was out of practice and probably hadn’t been involved in any proper combat in the last three years. His swordsmanship was simplistic and overly reliant on his weapon’s supposed powers. I easily parried all of his strikes before deciding to end the farce by whacking Naano in the solar plexus with my staff. Naano belched out air like a sick frog, then fell to the ground and rolled over several times in agony.

“Yeah, yeah. I know you’re a Level 300 dwarf wielding the ‘Fear Blade,’” I said, peering down at my opponent. “You think I’d lay a trap for you without making sure I knew what I would be up against?”

Naano didn’t respond immediately, since he was too busy nursing the excruciating pain in his midriff. Once it had subsided enough for him to focus on our fight again, he spat another insult in my direction.

“Y-You skinny little runt...”

Naano used his sword like a cane to get himself back on his feet, wincing in pain with every breath he took. I guessed he didn't like the fact that I was lording it over him, because the veins on his forehead were pulsating with rage and his grip on the Fear Sword had tightened. Even though his breath was still labored, he came swinging at me again.

"You think you're *better* than me, you grubby little inferior?!" Naano bawled. "The only thing you're good for is feeding my sword with your filthy blood! Who are *you* to attack such a brilliant blacksmith?! Know your place, you lowborn inferior!"

"You should learn *your* place, Naano," I said, parrying each of the dwarf's blows.

Once again, his swordplay had no hint of proficiency or subtlety about it, and there appeared to be no method whatsoever to his mad flailing. He was like an angry kid swinging a stick around. I had to admit, though, that these sloppy sword swings might possibly have worked against a low-level adventurer wielding a lower-class weapon, since the Fear Sword would strike dread into such an opponent and paralyze them.

While it was true that Naano was a Level 300 adventurer, he had prioritized his skills as a craftsman over honing his skills in combat. The only reason he had been successful in killing all those people was because of the powers of the Fear Sword. But Mei had trained me constantly in combat tactics from my very first days in the Abyss, so there was no way I was going to lose to an amateur swordsman like Naano. Plus, the level gap between me and Naano was too wide for him to land a single blow.

When Naano went to take a particularly large swing at me, I tracked his movement and rapped his knuckles with my staff, causing his weapon to fly out of his hands.

"Huh? My sword!" Naano yelled.

I saw my chance to close the gap and landed another kick that punted the dwarf into the air. He had managed to cross his arms in time to protect himself, but the force of the blow was too great, and he ended up landing a good distance away from both me and the sword.

"Why'd you let go of your weapon? All I did was tap your hand," I mocked him. "So this is the Fear Sword you're so proud of, huh?"

"Light, back off!" Naano yelled. "You won't take that legendary weapon from me!"

I gave the sword that had fallen near my feet a once-over with my eyes, and I could almost see faces with tortured expressions forming on the dark-red blade before promptly disappearing again. Hair from multiple people had been wound around the hilt, and there was so

much of it, my fingers would probably have gotten caught in all the strands if I'd tried to pick it up. The sword also seemed to have a dark aura surrounding it, which only added to my revulsion of the weapon.

"Who would ever want this disgusting sword?" I said. "Anyway, I think it's time to end this fight before we attract the attention of the patrols." I raised my staff and took aim at Naano's Fear Sword.

"Hey, stop! What do you think you're doing?!" Naano yelled at me. Before, his face was so red with anger, you could practically see it glowing even in the darkness, but now, he had gone completely pale.

"L-Light! Do you have any clue what you're about to do?" Naano continued. "You're trying to damage a legendary sword! A sword that will be talked about for centuries to come! You'll incur the wrath of the Goddess if you shatter it!"

"Legendary sword? Wrath of the Goddess?" I echoed. "Sounds like *you're* the one who needs to get a clue."

"Wh-What do you mean?" Naano said, sounding like someone trying to negotiate with a hostage taker. I turned to the dwarf and flashed him my best smile.

"You didn't craft a legendary weapon at all," I said, still beaming at him. "All you did was make a piece of junk, and you needlessly snuffed out several innocent human lives to do it. Nobody in this world would sing the praises of a sword that's so obviously cursed. Use your common sense, will you? We can't let this piece of junk exist in this world for a moment longer. Even talking about it is a waste of time. Time that would be better spent just trashing the thing!"

"No! No! No! No!" Naano cried out in anguish. "Please don't do it!"

Naano tried to rush me, but he was too late. I thrust my staff downward and shattered the Fear Sword into tiny pieces. Then for good measure, I swung my staff around again and smashed the hilt too. Naano howled like a wild animal as tears of blood streamed down his face. He made a beeline for the fragments of the sword, charging toward me like an enraged bull, but I wasn't even in Naano's scope of vision. All he was seeing was the broken weapon. Any normal person would be overwhelmed by this display, but not me. My three-year thirst for vengeance wouldn't allow me to be caught off guard.

"Liiight!" Naano yelled as he charged at me, but I countered with a swift kick to his face. I tried to hold back and not hit him with my full strength, but it wouldn't have been much of a surprise if I'd still caved in his skull and broken some of the bones in his neck. But thanks to my moderation and the fact that Naano was a Level 300 adventurer, the dwarf just about managed to survive the blow, though he did lose a few of his front teeth and his eyes rolled back into his head as he collapsed to the ground out cold.

“I’m not done taking my revenge on you, so I can’t have you dying just yet,” I told the prone dwarf. “Anyway, it’s time I got you out of here before anyone stumbles across us—”

“Well, well, well. It appears that I have finally brought you out into the open.”

A voice totally unknown to me interrupted my extremely brief respite after successfully capturing Naano. With a look of shock plastered across my face, I watched on as a human wearing a bandanna materialized out of the darkness, his squinting eyes seemingly locked on me.

Chapter 11: C

“I am supremely pleased that I have been able to bring you out into the light, so to speak,” the mystery man said. He looked to be around 170 centimeters tall with painfully average clothing covering his slim build, and the only things that would make this guy stand out in a crowd were the bandanna covering his forehead, his squinting eyes, and his obviously fake smile. I did my best to act surprised at his sudden appearance by raising my staff and assuming a battle stance.

“Hey, how long have you been standing there?” I said.

“Well, it seems you are only just over Level 1000,” the guy stated, ignoring my question. “Not what I was expecting of someone who was able to completely eradicate the White Knights. In which case, I would venture to guess that you have allies who are around the same power level and you all banded together to eliminate the Elven Queendom’s most elite order. Perhaps you lured them into some sort of clever trap. Or perhaps you had nothing to do with the Great Tower in the first place...”

The man took a few seconds to ponder if he had made a tactical error. “If that *were* the case, then perhaps I should have waited for your comrades to show up before revealing myself. Then again, greed tempts failure, so I should settle for just capturing you instead.”

“Seriously, what the heck are you talking about?” I said. What this guy was saying was so off the mark, I was starting to wonder if his mind was broken. I was even letting my guard down slightly because of the nonsense I was hearing, which wasn’t ideal as I was trying to put on a convincing act.

The corners of the man’s mouth curved upward, probably because he’d noticed my confusion. “It appears you are simply feigning ignorance. Or if not, you either don’t know what you are doing or you are being manipulated without your knowledge. I suppose that is rather by the by, since all I have to do is take this elsewhere so that I can poke and prod every inch of you. Oh, I am not implying that I would engage in any kind of *abnormal* behavior. I merely intend to wring information out of you using torture and other similar methods.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up! First of all, who *are* you? Do I even know you?” I said, still acting confused, and even going as far as hamming it up by raising a hand in an exaggerated manner. “You see

this dwarf out cold on the ground here?" I said. "This is Naano. He betrayed me and tried to kill me. I was in the middle of getting my revenge when you showed up. All right, tell you what: I'm not really in the mood for getting captured and tortured, so if there's anything you wanna ask me, I'll try to answer your questions as best I can. So can we at least talk to each other like normal people?"

"I am afraid a nice, civil conversation will not be possible, because I have every reason to believe you are my enemy," said the squinting man.

I raised my staff and readied myself for battle once more, because I could feel the murderous vibes emanating from the man, and it wasn't the aura of a Level 1000 or Level 2000 fighter either. The dark energy pouring out of him put even Hardy the Silent to shame, and this guy was supposedly human!

"I had thought you were one of C's subordinates—or at the very least, one of his useful idiots—but it appears you are simply an unwitting pawn," the guy said as he fiddled with his bandanna. "I still cannot safely rule out the possibility that this is all merely an elaborate ruse, but what I *can* say for certain is it is your sort who prove to be the biggest inconvenience, especially if I let you roam free. You have nothing of value to offer me, but I risk you giving up critical information to the other side. It is yet another reason why C is such a nuisance."

"What? Who's 'C'?" This nugget of info was completely new to me, but going purely off context, it seemed like this guy was talking about something *similar* to a Master, but not quite. I must have looked genuinely confused, because the guy was looking at me like I was a total buffoon who was completely unaware he was caught up in some criminal conspiracy. It also didn't look like the squinting guy was going to clear up any lingering questions anytime soon either.

"Anyway, we will get the chance to have a proper discussion later, once I have captured you," the man stated. "As for the dwarf—what was his name again?—handing him over to the sentries would be too much trouble, so I will simply wait while you slay him here."

"Wait, you want me to kill him *now*?" I said. "I want him alive so I can exact my revenge on him, remember?"

"Revenge? Oh, do not be absurd," the guy scoffed. "We have more *important* things to worry about than your petty desire for retribution."

The attitude of this guy—Cavaur, to give him his proper name—made me want to strangle him where he stood, but I remained where I was and bit my tongue. While getting revenge on my enemies was my number one goal, finding out the truth behind Masters and the assassination attempt on me also ranked high on the priority list. I couldn't afford to fly into a fit of blind rage, because it'd mean I would

end up killing a valuable source of intelligence. At the same time, I figured I'd bought enough time with my playacting, so I didn't think anyone would mind me putting this chatty ding-dong in his place.

"Okay, looks like you aren't gonna answer any of my questions willingly, are you?" I said, dropping the facade. "In that case, I'll just have to *persuade* you to talk."

"The only one here who will be taken by force and *persuaded* to spill the beans will be you, my boy," Cavaur stated. "It would behoove you to surrender yourself to me. But before you quietly hand yourself over to me, I will allow you to dispatch the dwarf in front of you in order to fulfill your little revenge fantasy."

Cavaur started strolling toward me with the inflated ego of someone who considered himself unbeatable, though I soon stopped him in his tracks with a few choice words.

"We'll see who is 'taken by force,' Mr. Level 5000, Flesh Zombie, Cavaur."

Cavaur looked stunned. "How do you know my name and my power level?"

"Mei!" I called out, and an instant later, a mass of Magistrings zoomed and twisted in the darkness, forming a hundred-meter dome that enclosed the two of us. Another set of Magistrings formed a cocoon around Naano and he was dragged out of the dome before Mei appeared beside me inside the enclosure, finally revealing herself to Cavaur.

"We have ensnared him as per your plan, Master Light," Mei stated. "There are now only the three of us inside this enclosure."

"Amazing work, Mei," I said. "I'm glad I brought you along on this one."

Mei visibly shuddered with pleasure, but she quickly regained her composure and bowed to me. "Thank you, Master Light. Your words mean the world to me."

Cavaur watched this exchange through the narrow gaps between his half-closed eyelids. His guard was well and truly up by this point, and he had an aggravated look on his face.

"I believed I had successfully entrapped a disciple of C, but I never expected to fall into a trap myself," Cavaur uttered. "So your real target was me and not the dwarf all along, I take it?"

"Honestly, this was all just extra precautionary measures," I told him. "We knew you had been in contact with Naano and your demeanor raised a lot of red flags, but we weren't able to figure out anything about you other than your name and power level. Naano was still my main target, but we decided we would capture you too if you showed up, so I got Mei to lurk about in the shadows."

The fact of the matter was I hadn't known who Cavaur really was

until the very last minute. To the naked eye, Cavaur didn't look like anything other than a normal human being, even when staring him in the face like this, and he had faked his stats to fool a regular Appraisal. I hadn't wanted to blow my cover by using an SR Appraisal card in front of him, so I'd gotten Mei to use her native Appraisal powers on the guy while I distracted him. She had then informed me of his name and true power level using an SR Telepathy card.

Cavaur pressed his fingers to his forehead as if he was nursing a chagrin-induced headache. "I thought I had taken all the care in the world not to be hoist by my own petard, yet it appears I have foolishly shown myself to you without ever noticing this other foe named Mei. This would never have happened if I had been given more aid to successfully complete this assignment."

"You can save your 'lessons learned' review for later," I said. "Right now, we need some answers. Who is 'C'? What's your *real* story?"

The Level 5000 Flesh Zombie glowered at me through his permasquint. "I suggest you do not get ahead of yourself, little boy. You may have ensnared me in this trap of yours, but two Level 1000 lightweights will never capture *me*!"

As he uttered this last word, every inch of muscle on Cavaur's body suddenly bulged and expanded, causing his clothes to rip and explode off his body, save for a patch of his pants around the pelvic region. And not only did he bulk up, but Cavaur also grew several centimeters in height until he was well over two meters tall. It was as if he was able to extend his bones on command. Last of all, his eyes that had been half-shut up to this point were now open as wide as could be, though his pupils were so dilated, it almost looked like his eyeballs were entirely black. Mei and I were honestly stunned by the sight. It was like watching a tiny green shoot grow into a giant redwood in the span of just a few seconds.

Though it became immediately obvious that Cavaur had confused our looks of surprise for ones of fear. "You were right in appraising me as the Flesh Zombie. I may look like an ordinary slender man at first sight, but I was actually created out of hundreds of humans. My previous guise was one I adopted to remain inconspicuous, but as I will now demonstrate, I am not just proficient in manipulating my appearance!"

Cavaur balled up a fist into what looked like an oversized mallet and rushed toward us at a speed that caught both Mei and me off guard, since you wouldn't expect a two-meter-tall goliath to move that fast. We managed to dodge his hammer-fist at the last second as it slammed into the ground and gouged out a sizable crater. The force of the blow was so powerful, the walls of nearby buildings crumbled,

raising a huge cloud of dust as if we were in the middle of an earthquake. It was a good thing we'd thought to relocate the people living in this area to somewhere safe beforehand, because otherwise, we might have found ourselves dealing with a substantial body count.

"You won't get away!" Cavaur roared as a mighty swing of his foot tore a trench in the ground, hurling debris in our direction at high speed. Despite the rising dust cloud blocking all visibility, Cavaur's aim was true, but the flying rocks weren't enough to overwhelm us. I simply swatted away any large hunk of rock or ball of dirt that came my way with my staff without even bothering to use a card, while Mei sidestepped the debris with minimal effort. In fact, we were apparently so adept at countering Cavaur's attack, he started mock clapping us.

"I can scarcely believe you were able to evade my attack," Cavaur said. "You are quite nimble for Level 1000s, though it appears evasion is the only thing you two are proficient at."

"And I'm impressed you were able to kick that debris directly at us despite not being able to see through the dust," I replied.

"As you should be!" Cavaur yelled. "This body of mine is a masterpiece that was molded by a Master! Thanks to my abilities, I have no trouble tracking your movements. The only issue—or should I say, the only slight irritation—is that I need to eat humans to maintain this body."

"Did you say 'a Master'?" I said, completely stupefied. "And wait, did you just say you *eat* people?"

"Yes, I eat people. And that is not a metaphor or a figure of speech," Cavaur said with a heartless grin. "I need to eat humans at regular intervals in order to maintain the integrity of this body, in the same way that you people eat the flesh of animals to sustain yourselves. Though in my experience, I enjoy eating my prey while it is still alive. Those who share strong bonds make for the best meals, such as a parent and a child, a brother and a sister, or two star-crossed lovers!"

Cavaur went on to describe his favorite dinnertime scenario in gruesome detail. "One half of the duo would beg me to eat them if I promised to spare their loved one, and I would happily indulge their final request by devouring them in front of their children, little brothers, baby sisters, or sweethearts as applicable. The looks of horror and the tears streaming down their faces as I munch on their loved ones is the best seasoning anyone could ask for! Most of the time, I keep my promise and allow the other to carry on living, but sometimes, I like to add a little variety to my feasts by eating both after promising I would spare one of them! The comical looks of betrayal on their faces whenever I go against my word makes these

meals so much more delectable—”

“Enough!” I barked, interrupting Cavaur’s long-winded spiel. “Not another word, you piece of filth.”

I was so angry, I could feel my pupils constricting, but Cavaur simply shrugged like a refined gentleman who had been mildly criticized over his choice of hobby.

“That is rather spiteful of you,” Cavaur sniffed. “Then again, this is why I am not fond of children such as yourself. People your age are incapable of appreciating a pastime as cultured as mine.”

“I don’t wanna hear it!” I yelled, barely able to suppress my rage. “You’ve just sealed your fate. I’m gonna capture you, squeeze all the information I can out of you, then make you suffer more than all those innocent people you brutally killed!”

Cavaur laughed, then let his face crinkle into a well-mannered smile. “I can see that you have a backbone. If you truly think you can beat me, then let us see you try, you bratty little pip-squeak!”

With his eyelids peeled back again to reveal completely black orbs, Cavaur swung a fist at me, but this time, I didn’t bother to dodge his attack. Keeping my staff in one hand, I balled my other hand up into a fist and countered his punch with one of my own. I was dealing with a two-meter-tall monster here, and his fist was also supersized, so anyone watching would have assumed a full-grown adult was about to beat up a helpless kid, and normally, that would be a correct presumption.

When our two fists connected, Cavaur cried out in agony, my punch crushing his arm into a mess of broken bones that protruded from his skin. At that same moment, I swung my foot at Cavaur and booted him into the air with enough force to make him bounce once like a kickball before crashing heavily into the wall of the Magistring dome. Once he’d flopped down to the ground again, Cavaur raised his shattered arm to get a closer look at the mangled mess.

“This is absurd,” Cavaur mumbled, shuddering from head to toe. “How could you have injured my arm like this? My power level is superior to yours! I am bigger and physically stronger than you! I should have won that contest!”

“Are you gonna lie there all day?” I mocked. “Or is eating defenseless humans the only thing you’re good at?”

“Do not assume you have won, simpleminded worm.” Cavaur quickly got to his feet, showing no sign of being in any pain, though he was clearly pissed off, judging by the way he clicked his tongue.

“It seems you are relying on the help of some sort of magic item or magic weapon to fight me on an equal footing,” Cavaur guessed. “I see now how you were able to defeat the commander of the White Knights. Vanquishing such an opponent would have been relatively

simple if you are able to stand your ground against a Level 5000 fighter like me. I wanted to capture you alive, but I have already wasted too much time and I risk you escaping from my grasp. I did not want it to come to this, but I have no choice but to kill the two of you where you stand.”



Cavaur balled up both his damaged and undamaged hands into fists and started straining his whole body for some bizarre reason. The next thing I knew, a whole bunch of weapons burst out of his skin like porcupine needles, and from what I could see, they included knives, scythes, spear tips, sword blades, and even a mage's scepter made from bone.

"Were you hiding those weapons inside your body?" I said. "Wait, are they *all* cursed?"

I could see dark mana emanating from all of the weapons poking out of Cavaur's body, and my opponent's triumphant smirk confirmed my suspicions.

"Cursed weapons and taboo magic items have an overwhelming advantage in terms of power against weapons in the same class," Cavaur stated. "But because they are cursed, there is no person alive who is able to wield them with ease."

Cavaur paused and spread his arms wide to reveal the entirety of the arsenal sticking out of his body.

"However, a Master sculpted my body out of lifeless human cadavers!" Cavaur declared. "And as a Flesh Zombie, I am not strictly 'alive,' which means cursed weapons have no negative effects on me! In my many years wandering the realms, I have found and absorbed a large number of cursed weapons. Furthermore, they resonate with each other inside my body and mutually enhance their powers! It has even reached the point where my body itself has transformed into an upper-level phantasma-class cursed weapon!"

Cavaur continued displaying the weapons in his body with something of a boastful swagger. "Just coming into contact with my body is all it takes to confer every type of pain and ailment that exists in this world onto you. One touch from me will make the two of you writhe in unimaginable pain until you breathe your last, and the sheer agony of it will make you regret ever being born into this world. But it is far, *far* too late to beg for your lives! I shall grant you the cruelest death conceivable for daring to defy me! As for getting information out of you, I can always extract whatever I need from your twisted remains."

I sighed at this pitiful show of bluster. "You know, you talk big for someone who has a bunch of weapons that don't amount to a hill of beans."

"Your attempts to hoodwink me will not work, child," Cavaur said, chuckling. "I am well aware of just how much fear I am instilling in both of you."

"Might I say something?" Mei interjected. "I simply cannot fathom why we should be fearful of any cursed weapon of your class."

Despite Mei's rather matter-of-fact comeback, Cavaur looked like he still didn't believe that we weren't the least bit afraid of him. Sure, I could have ended the fight right then and there by simply punching him in the neck and knocking him out cold, then dragging him off home, but Cavaur had consumed countless humans in some of the most gruesome ways imaginable, so I couldn't let this monster off the hook that easy.

"Oh, I know!" I said, suddenly landing on an idea. "I know the best way to show you how we couldn't be any less scared of you than we currently are."

"Really? Is that the best rejoinder you can come up with?" Cavaur jeered. "Whatever you have in mind will amount to nothing, unless this is some clever gambit to buy you time so that more of your comrades can come to your aid."

"I'm not being clever or playing a trick, I promise," I replied. "But you see, the thing is, I have a more powerful cursed weapon that will make you taste *real* fear and suffering."

I activated my Item Box, stashed away my staff, and replaced it with a large sword. One glance at my new weapon caused Cavaur's face to contort in horror, and it looked like he was too terrified to even utter a whimper. A businesslike smile appeared on my face as I waved the sword around to give Cavaur a better look at it.

"I'm really glad I kept this thing in my Item Box," I said. "I knew it'd come in handy someday."

"H-H-Have you lost your *mind*?!" Cavaur finally managed to splutter. "Where did you get that cursed sword?! And how?! How are you able to keep *smiling* while holding that thing?! Has it already sent you insane?"

The previously fearless Flesh Zombie was sweating buckets and stuttering his speech as he stared in disbelief at my weapon, the UR World Eater. The broadsword was longer than I was tall, but what *really* set it apart from other swords were the countless mouths on the surface of the blade. Some of the mouths were filled with fangs, while others had needlelike incisors, and yet others had uneven, jagged teeth. Even though it was only an ultra-rare weapon, the World Eater had been appraised as mythical-class, likely because it was so obviously cursed. To put it another way, the World Eater totally outclassed whatever phantasma-class abilities Cavaur might possess.

"I'm not insane, so start showing me some respect," I said, my brow furrowing. "In any case, I'm Level 9999, so I can easily handle a weapon like this."

"L-Level 9999?! " Cavaur exclaimed. "You lie! My Appraisal placed you at Level 1000! You must be bluffing!"

"Oh, that? Yeah, we falsified our stats to lure you in," I explained.

“No...” Cavaur breathed. “No, no, no, no! It’s all lies! That cursed sword is completely fake too!”

It sounded like Cavaur was trying to convince himself that his eyes and other senses were lying to him, because if he were to accept the reality of the situation, he would be too paralyzed with fear to act. After goading himself to move, Cavaur lunged at me desperately—and I mean *desperately*, because unlike his earlier, more polished attacks, this attempt to do damage was as sloppy as an inexperienced schoolkid trying to fight off a playground bully.

“Drop dead!” Cavaur cried as he swung his arm around and tried to chop off my head with the scythe sprouting from it. I easily beat away the curved blade with the World Eater, and because Cavaur had unthinkingly barreled into his attack, he overbalanced and left himself vulnerable to my next strike.

“Gaaaah!” Writhing in pain, Cavaur clutched at his right wrist, which was now missing a hand. My brow wrinkled in disappointment.

“I was never all that good with a sword when you trained me, was I, Mei?” I reflected. “I was trying to cut off his whole arm, not just his hand.”

“But your form has improved tremendously from what it once was, Master Light,” Mei replied.

“You sure?” I asked with a slight smile. “I accept the compliment.”

Mei had been training me in how to fight with various weapons from the very beginning, so you might call her my longtime weapons tutor. While Mei and I shared this lighthearted moment, Cavaur slumped to his knees, gritted his teeth, and seethed at the pain shooting from his amputated wrist.

“Why? How?” Cavaur wailed. “I am meant to be the Flesh Zombie! I am not *supposed* to feel pain! Why does this hurt so badly?!”

“Oh, it’s quite simple, really,” I said. “You see, the World Eater doesn’t just chop off body parts; it severs those parts from your being forever. That’s why you’re finding it so painful.” The World Eater was a reality-bending mythical-class weapon, so even if an opponent had stats that negated pain, they weren’t immune to the powers of the sword.

“Oh, and another thing: you won’t be able to restore that body part, no matter how much restoration magic you use on it,” I added.

Honestly, the World Eater would have been such an all-conquering, power-boosting weapon if just anyone could wield it, but the fact of the matter was, unless the wielder was Level 9000 or above, they would sink into a state of mental derangement that would see them trying to cut their own heads off. As such, the only people who could even touch the World Eater were me, Mei, Ellie, Aoyuki, and Nazuna, and since the four women were already adequately

armed with their own weapons of choice, they didn't need the World Eater. So it had been left to me to keep it in my possession on the off chance I would need it at some point, and as it turned out, this weapon was the first thing to cause Cavaur pain in his miserable life.

I strolled over to the distressed zombie. "That said, I think it's about time I cut off your other hand, plus your feet to make sure you can't get away."

"How in the name of all that exists are you able to keep wielding that accursed blade?" Cavaur mumbled, still clutching his right wrist. "The only reasonable explanation is that you really are above Level 9000." He raised his head. "You—or rather you and your ally over there—must be Masters. I cannot imagine the amount of time and effort it must take to level up to that degree."

"Nope, we're not 'Masters,' I'm sorry to say," I declared, eliciting a snort of disbelief from Cavaur.

"It is no use trying to fool me at this late stage," he said. "But if you two really *are* over Level 9000, then you *must* be connected to C. Damn! If only I had hit upon this critical piece of information sooner, I would have known how best to neutralize you."

"I know you're pissed off and all, but we still have questions that need answering," I said coldly. "In other words, we'll be the ones to take you by force, whisk you away to someplace more comfortable, and—how did you put it again? Oh, yeah—poke and prod every inch of you."

After I'd thrown Cavaur's exact phrasing back in his face, the Flesh Zombie looked like he was fuming, but he couldn't hit me with a comeback of his own because he knew the tables had turned completely, and there was no running from me, Mei, or the Magistring dome. Cavaur looked around him for a possible escape route, but as there was no obvious way out, he clicked his tongue in frustration. Of course, the dome had been erected to prevent Cavaur from fleeing, but the structure also served another purpose that I didn't feel like telling him about. At least, not yet.

Cavaur's grimace all of a sudden relaxed into a contemptuous sneer. It looked like I was right to assume that he still thought he could get out of this somehow. "I believe it is time for us to part company—especially now that I have acquired some very valuable information," Cavaur stated. "I will take my leave, even if it involves using extreme measures."

"Do you really think you can escape?" I scoffed.

"Of course," Cavaur said. "Here is a lesson you should take to heart: always save your trump card for the last possible moment, when you need it most."

Cavaur flashed me a condescending grin before gurgling and

coughing up an orb, which I assumed was a magic item that had been stowed away somewhere in his innards.

“I bid you farewell, my boy. Translocation Gem! Whisk me far from here!”

Cavaur bit down on this so-called Translocation Gem, causing the orb to explode into a load of bright sparkles that rained down around him. But once the light show had eventually faded away, Cavaur was still kneeling in the same place.

“Why have I not teleported?! Why?!” Cavaur cried out. “I *know* I activated the Translocation Gem! Y-You have not made this dome impervious to teleportation magic, have you? Only a holy site, a dungeon, or a Level 9000 mage is capable of such sorcery! Is this maid of yours a high-level sorceress? Is she? She cannot be!”

“Well, there *is* a trick behind how we turned your teleport item into a dud, but I’m not one to spill secrets. And just so you know, this dome also blocks telepathic messages to and from your comrades.”

Cavaur stared at me in stunned silence, so I continued. “Like I said before, we’re the ones who will capture you by force. From the second you were trapped inside this dome, there was no escape for you.”

Scrunched up as it was, Cavaur’s face was the very picture of anguished mortification, which suggested he was definitely sweating over the fact that he couldn’t contact anyone for help using telepathy. It looked like Ellie and Nazuna were doing their jobs superbly. *I really need to thank them both later*, I told myself.

I lowered my gaze till it landed on Cavaur and started walking toward him. “Anyway, I think it’s about time I immobilized you.”

“W-Wait! Stay where you are!” Cavaur barked, stretching his one undamaged hand out toward me. “You are certainly free to capture me, but if you go as far as to kill me, it will only raise the suspicions of the Masters!” he pleaded. “The Masters are far more powerful than you could ever imagine. Are you really sure you want to make enemies of them if you can avoid it? I am willing to keep your existence a secret from the Masters if you release me now! I am granting you an opportunity to negotiate an acceptable outcome for both of us!”

“And why should I care if any ‘Masters’ become my enemies?” I said, immediately rejecting his offer of a deal. “Whoever gets in my way is my sworn enemy, Master or no.”

Cavaur howled in horror. “No, stay away from me! Stay back, you monster! Monster! Don’t come near meeeee!”

I was pretty sure Cavaur was screaming in the exact same way the victims he had devoured would have done, but I still approached him with the darkest expression I could muster on my face. The first thing I did was chop off his left hand that was still stretched out toward me

with the World Eater, causing him to cry out in pain and collapse to the ground again, where he writhed in unbearable agony. Showing no sign of mercy, I drew closer to Cavaur with my sword ready, as if preparing to put a wounded animal out of its misery.

Cavaur shrieked in genuine terror and began pleading to his maker. “H-Heeelp! Master! Save me please!”

Cavaur’s face contorted in pain as panic overtook him and he tried to crawl away from me on the two bloody stubs at the ends of his mutilated arms. Unfortunately for him, all the weapons that were sticking out of his body were only slowing him down, and it was a completely pointless gesture anyway, since there was no escaping from the dome.

“Nobody’s going to save you, Cavaur. No help is coming,” I proclaimed. “The only thing in store for you is a whole world of pain and suffering. All you can do is accept your fate and wallow in your despair.”

I raised the World Eater like it was an executioner’s axe, then sliced off both of Cavaur’s feet with one downward swing, which elicited another tortured scream from the zombie, though this one was louder and longer than when I’d cut off his hands. I wondered if maybe the World Eater had exerted more of its power with that last stroke.

With all four limbs severed, I had rendered Cavaur unable to limp or even crawl along the ground. I could have tortured him some more at this point, but I didn’t really have the time for that kind of stuff, and besides, the pain I would inflict on him could never compare to the suffering he had put all of his human victims through. Also, there was a chance that I might accidentally kill him, and in that scenario, we wouldn’t be able to extract any information from him. So instead, I settled for delivering a swift kick to Cavaur’s chin to render him unconscious so that he wouldn’t give us any trouble on his way to getting his mind probed.



“Mei, once you’ve tied him up nice and tight, teleport him to the Abyss,” I ordered.

“As you command, Master Light,” Mei said before promptly going to work. “I will take care of everything.”

As Mei dismantled the Magistring dome, I turned to address my assistants who had been operating in the shadows this whole time. The first thing I saw as the strings unraveled themselves was a ring of pillars that were around four or five meters in height and had runes etched all over them. These pillars encircled the battle zone, and it went without saying that they had been placed there after Mei had

constructed the dome. Standing next to a couple of these columns were the two other lieutenants I'd brought along on this mission.

"Master!" Nazuna called out, practically scampering up to me like a puppy.

"Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie said, similarly swift in her approach. "Did your battle go well?"

When Nazuna reached me, I squeezed her cheeks to express my gratitude. "Thank you so much for building that makeshift barrier, you two."

"It sure wasn't easy having Ellie bossin' me around and tellin' me where to plant all these pillars here, but I'd do anything for ya, master!" Nazuna said.

"Thanks again, Nazuna," I replied, petting her like she was a cocker spaniel. She giggled with joy, her expression dissolving into a broad, contented smile.

"Yes, we managed to capture Cavaur, thanks to you guys," I said in reply to Ellie's question. "Mei is going to take him down to the Abyss, so I'm counting on you to wring every last bit of info out of him, Ellie. Be sure to find out everything he knows about Masters and this 'C' character."

"Say no more, Your Blessedness," Ellie said. "This Forbidden Witch shall scoop out all the information Mr. Cavaur has in that head of his!"

"I know you will," I said. "That's also why I asked you to construct the makeshift barrier. Because I know I can rely on you."

"Your words honor me greatly, Blessed Lord." Ellie clutched the hem of her bicolored skirt and curtsied as elegantly as any noblewoman, though I couldn't help noticing that she was blushing all the way to her eartips and trembling slightly with joy.

What I hadn't told Cavaur was that Ellie's makeshift barrier was the thing that had magically jammed his teleportation orb and telepathic calls for help. It was the same type of witchcraft that had canceled out all teleportation magic during the Great Tower battles with the White Knights. The only drawback to the barrier was Ellie needed to set up pillars before she could activate it, which meant it wasn't a spell that could be cast quickly.

While it was true that I had gotten Mei to create the Magistring dome so that nobody could see us fighting, it was also to prevent Cavaur from noticing Ellie setting up her magical barrier. Ellie had released an R Silent card as soon as the dome had been erected so that nobody inside the enclosure could hear the groundwork being laid, and thanks to Nazuna's brute strength, the Forbidden Witch was able to get the pillars into place quickly, meaning our plan went off without a hitch, completely unnoticed by Cavaur. We could have

assigned a larger crew to the task of setting up the pillars instead of having Nazuna do it on her own, but we had very little idea who we were up against, so I limited my support team to just the Level 9999 SUR warriors, who would be best able to withstand Cavaur's attacks. Aoyuki was the only one from my inner circle who I hadn't brought along, since we needed her to monitor the surrounding area through her animal familiars.

We hadn't needed to worry about being hassled by any of the dwarf sentries out on patrol, because even if one of them had come over to question what we were doing, Dagan's seal gave us the authority to send them on their way—by force, if necessary. We weren't likely to get in trouble over the damaged buildings either, since we had received permission to do whatever we liked in this part of town, on the proviso that no innocent people would be injured or killed. Or to put it another way, there had been no physical or legal recourse for Cavaur to prevail once he had strolled unwittingly into our trap.

"Master Light, I am ready to teleport," Mei said once she had finished restraining Cavaur. "I shall take my leave now."

"Mei, if I might say something first?" Ellie interjected, staring Cavaur right in his face. "I would rather you took Mr. Cavaur to the Great Tower's underground level instead. I have a nagging feeling about him."

Mei glanced at me, unsure if she should act on Ellie's suggestion. Of course, I saw no reason to second-guess the superwitch's instincts.

"Sure, take him to the tower like Ellie says," I told my maid.

"As you wish, Master Light," Mei replied.

"Thank you so much, Blessed Lord Light!" Ellie said.

I held up a hand to indicate I had additional orders to dish out. "Ellie, Nazuna, you two take care of the cleanup here. Teleport some fairy maids over if you need them. As for me, I'm taking Naano back to the Abyss with me so I can finish getting my revenge on him."

"Okey dokey, master!" Nazuna said cheerily. "We'll clean up this mess and make it all nice and tidy!"

"We'll be sure to leave this place looking like nobody has done battle here," Ellie agreed. "As such, you are free to exact your divine retribution on Mr. Naano in the knowledge that we are taking care of everything up here, Your Blessedness."

I nodded and smiled at the two of them. It took me every last ounce of my willpower not to skip gleefully over to the still-unconscious Naano, because that was just how incredibly excited I was, knowing I was about to give this evil dwarf the just deserts I had whipped up especially for him. After all, the stage had already been set for him down in the Abyss and all that was missing was his

presence.

Chapter 12: Three Choices

Naano awoke with a grunt and found himself flat on his back with all of his wounds completely healed. He could tell by looking at the ceiling and by the feel of the floor under his cloak that he was in a cavern, and a spacious one at that.

“Where in damnation am I?” Naano muttered. “And how did I get here?”

Dazed and confused, he sat up and scanned his surroundings. Well, at least until his eyes met mine, at which point, his face morphed instantly into a scowl.

“Light, you little bastard!” Naano spat, quickly scrambling to his feet and assuming a fighting stance. “You smashed my legendary Fear Sword with your little stick!”

That’s seriously the first thing that comes out of his mouth? I thought as I stared Naano straight in his wrath-filled eyes. He should be more worried about what’s gonna happen to him, instead of griping over that chintzy old sword.

I had brought Naano down to the bottom tier of the Abyss and deposited him in a place where I could dish out a satisfying helping of vengeance on him. I had placed my God Requiem Gungnir, the Bracelet of Youth, and all the other magical items and weapons I usually had on my person in my Item Box, so that all I was wearing in addition to my normal clothes was a black cloak and hood. I was completely unarmed and without armor, and I was facing Naano alone. All for good reason too: I wanted to thoroughly humiliate the dwarf to the point where he would never recover.

I sighed and voiced the thoughts tumbling around in my head. “What exactly was so legendary about that sword? I thought I told you up on the surface that nobody would ever call that cursed piece of junk ‘legendary,’ no matter how many centuries you waited for it to happen.”

“Shut up, inferior!” Naano yelled. “You and the rest of your mudbrained species will never realize what has been lost! Ending your worthless life will never make up for what you’ve done!”

Hm, I used the SSSR High Exorcism card on him to restore his sanity, but it looks like all that stuff he was saying up on the surface really did come from the heart, I thought. His babblings weren’t just because he had been driven mad by that forbidden weapon.

The SSSR High Exorcism card was powerful enough to purify my arm after wielding a partially unsealed Gungnir, meaning there was pretty much zero chance that it hadn't worked on Naano. For that reason, I had no choice but to assume he really did believe all this garbage he was spouting about his former sword being "legendary."

I sighed again and held up three fingers. "Naano, for the crimes you have committed, your fate now hangs on one of three choices."

As Naano's eyes fixed themselves on my fingers, I slowly curled my middle and ring fingers to leave only my index finger extended. "Your first option is to confess to your crimes and turn yourself in to the Dwarf Kingdom's authorities so that you can face justice according to the laws of the land. I have already made prior arrangements with the kingdom, and although I naturally don't know what crimes they will find you guilty of, I'd wager they will impose the death penalty on you, if not worse."

I raised a second finger. "Your second choice is to hand yourself over to me. Even though it was all a lie, you did take care of me for a while. You'll still be put to death for the multitude of humans you slaughtered, but I will be merciful and grant you a swift and painless execution."

His senses on high alert, Naano's eyes narrowed, because he knew either option would spell his demise, and in the case of turning himself in to the Dwarf Kingdom, there was a very real chance that he'd end up suffering a fate worse than death. If I were in Naano's shoes, I'd be wondering if I was hearing things, and how much of these pronouncements were true and how much were simply empty threats.

"Your third and final choice is to fight me," I said, raising a third finger. "If you're able to kill me where I stand, you *might* be able to escape from here, the bottom layer of the Abyss. Of course, it'll be a cold day in hell before you're actually able to make it out of here alive, but if you *do* want to live—if you really dream that impossible dream—then you have no choice but to fight me. So what's it gonna be, Naano?"

"Waitamminute. We're in the Abyss?!" Naano spluttered. "This is the lowest floor of the Abyss? That's insanity! Have you got any idea just how *far* that dungeon is from the Dwarf Kingdom? I reckon I've only been out for two or three hours tops, judging by the ache in my bones. There's no way we could've traveled that distance in that short amount of time! And besides, no one in this whole godforsaken world has made it to the bottom of the Abyss alive!"

"I have no reason to lie to you," I said simply. "Whether you choose to believe me or not is entirely up to you."

Naano was right, though. He *had* only been out for about three

hours. I'd brought him here using an SSR Teleportation card, then used healing magic to fix up all of his wounds, because it would've been difficult to take revenge on him if he'd ended up dying from them. He had then woken up in the middle of the training grounds, which still retained the feel of the old dungeon before we redeveloped it, but it appeared Naano still wasn't able to accept the truth.

"You probably brought me to a nearby abandoned mine or something, you damn phony," Naano muttered. "All you inferiors play dirty 'cause you *are* dirty. I can wrap my head around those last two choices fine, but not the first one. Why the hell would my own nation convict me of a crime? I'm no criminal!"

"Are you really saying that with a straight face?" I asked, honestly stunned by what I was hearing. I pressed my fingers to my temple. "You killed humans to craft a forbidden weapon, remember? That's clearly against the law in all nine nations. And if that wasn't enough, you went around killing a bunch of innocent humans and dwarves who were walking the streets of the capital. How can you think you're innocent after all that?"

"Oh, I feel bad for killing some of my brethren, don't get me wrong," Naano conceded. "But why should I be accused of murder just for using a bunch of inferiors to make a sword? That's a load of hogwash!" There was no hint of irony or dishonesty in his voice. "You and your kind are inferiors! You're no better than scrap iron!" he fulminated. "I'm the renowned blacksmith who molded you useless hunks of scrap iron into a legendary sword! Yes, the nine nations might have put a ban on forbidden weapons that are cursed, but there's no ban on *legendary* weapons! They should be thanking me, not arresting me!"

This time, Naano had left me completely dumbfounded. For one thing, the Dwarf Kingdom had definitely made it illegal to kill humans indiscriminately, which meant the full weight of the law came down on anyone who murdered a free human adventurer. Even in the event of someone killing a human slave, it would be regarded as "destruction of property." Yet in his heart of hearts, Naano believed he had committed no crime, since us humans were nothing more than scrap iron to him. He was willing to stand before a judge and argue that there was nothing criminal about massacring a whole bunch of people, since they were just humans. No doubt he'd end up ranting about how it was the rest of the world that was wrong, while he was in the right.

He was never this evil in the past, I thought, recalling the day the Concord of the Tribes had attempted to assassinate me in this very dungeon. While Garou and Sasha had taken turns drawing blood from me, all Naano had done was stand off to the side with a bored look on

his face.

“C’m on, kill him already!” Naano had said back then. “We’re burning daylight as we speak.”

Naano had certainly looked down on humans, just like the rest of my former party, but he hadn’t gleefully taken an active role in the assassination attempt on me like some of the others.

He must’ve started seeing humans as living material to use in smithing while he was forging that Fear Sword, I thought. Or maybe this homicidal bias against humans is something he secretly held all along, but it was only crafting that forbidden weapon that finally brought those hidden feelings to the surface. Whatever the reason, Naano had made his bed by forging that Fear Sword without an ounce of compunction and it was time for him to lie in it. There was no coming back from that.

“Enough of the dumb excuses! Hurry up and make your choice, Naano!” I glared icily at the dwarf, who simply snorted menacingly.

“You really think I’d pick any other option, boy?” Naano scoffed, balling his hands into fists as an evil grin curled the corners of his mouth upward. “I choose option three, just in case you didn’t catch my meaning. All I gotta do is put you in the ground and be on my merry way outta here, right? That’s just dandy, since I’m duty bound to craft a new legendary weapon!”

Naano had chosen the worst option of the three, just like I knew he would. It was all so predictable that I almost burst out laughing.

“I’m gonna make you pay for destroying my legendary sword!” Naano screeched at me, paying no attention to my stifled giggling. “Don’t think you’re some big shot just ’cause you won the first round! You got a lucky hit in while I was distracted by you shattering my Fear Sword, that’s all! I’ll smash your mud-filled head open with my bare hands!”

“You sure you wanna go with option three?” I asked to confirm he was happy with his choice.

“Huh? Why the hell wouldja think I’d pick either of the other two?” Naano said. “Do all of your kind have brainworms?”

“Okay, then I guess we have a deal,” I said with a mockingly easygoing attitude to the whole thing. “Tell you what: since you’re brave enough to fight me, I’ll do you a favor and even up the odds a little.” I spread my arms wide. “If you can make me move even one step from this spot, then I’ll declare you the winner of the fight and let you go free, no questions asked. My word is my bond.”

“Y-You muck-headed inferior!” Naano yelled. “You ain’t nothing but a two-bit chump! That last fight we had didn’t count for shit!”

Naano rushed toward me to take the first swing, the dwarf eating up the ground between us faster than his stumpy legs would suggest. “You’ll pay for smashing up my Fear Sword with your life!”

“I’d like to see you try!” I shouted back.

Naano attempted to pound my face with a right straight, but there was no finesse in his totally readable punch and I deftly moved my head to one side to avoid it. This whiff threw Naano totally off-balance and a slight shove to his exposed back was all it took to make him face-plant the ground, a pained grunt escaping from his mouth as he hit the rocky terrain beneath him.

“I know dwarves aren’t natural-born fighters and that’s why they rely so much on their armor and weaponry, but this is just sad,” I said. “You have to fight better than a kid if you really want to beat me.”

“Damn you, Light!” Naano roared.

Not only was his skin all scratched and bloody, an “inferior” was mocking him, so I could understand why Naano was pissed off. But in my defense, his fighting skills were so trash-level, I couldn’t help commenting on them. It looked like my provocation had hit a nerve, because a red-faced and bleeding Naano quickly got back to his feet and lunged at me again. Unfortunately, he hadn’t taken my criticism of his fighting style to heart, because he aimed yet another wild swing at me that was easy to dodge. *Does he even want to win?* I wondered.

This process repeated itself several times: Naano would throw a punch at me, I’d evade it and shove him to the ground. Finally, after the umpteenth time, Naano stayed down, gasping hard to catch his breath.

“Is this how you’re going to win?” I asked in some exasperation. “Or have you been pulling your punches in the hope that I’ll put you out of your misery?”

“You jackass...” Naano wheezed. “You must be using some kind of magic item to boost your stats, you puny little cheat...”

“You said the same thing up on the surface,” I replied. “But this time, I don’t have any weapons or magic items on me. I’m fighting you with nothing but my own strength, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t accuse me of cheating.”

Still splayed out on the ground, Naano flashed me a dirty look and gritted his teeth. However, this reaction seemed a little *too* performative for my liking, and I didn’t think that just because he’d tricked me when we were both in the Concord of the Tribes. The way he was acting at that moment smelled way too fishy to me.

He’s probably trying to make it look like he’s close to giving up, so that I’ll lower my guard, I said to myself. In other words, he had some trick up his sleeve that he thought would turn the tables.

Naano got to his feet once more, his eyes gleaming with hatred. “You think you’re so high-and-mighty for an inferior, don’t you? Well, you’ll learn your place once I snap your scrawny little neck in two!”

Drawing on his last reserves of strength, Naano dashed straight for

me. *Is he gonna try to hit me with another punch I can see coming from a mile away?* I thought.

As he got closer, I noticed Naano's mouth curl into a slight smirk before he suddenly loosened his cloak and tossed it at me while bellowing a war cry. Of course, the cloak didn't hurt at all when it hit me; all it did was obscure my vision for a brief moment. Apparently, Naano was counting on that split second of blindness for his next move. I shoved the cloak out of my face and was met with the sight of Naano lunging at me with a knife drawn. Assured of victory, Naano plunged the short blade into my chest, aiming for the vital organs, a demonically gleeful expression splashed across his face throughout his rabid attack.

"You human inferiors are all the same!" Naano bellowed, thrusting the knife into me repeatedly. "You thought the Fear Sword was the only thing I'd crafted? Me, the legendary blacksmith?! Hah! This artifact-class knife was the very first thing I forged! You were too much of a stupid inferior to pat me down after knocking me out! You mudbrain! Mudbrain! You mudbrain inferior!"

Naano kept stabbing me in the chest and all over my torso, and the frenzied flurry was enough to turn my internal organs into a carved-up mess and kill me where I stood. At least, it would have been if the knife could actually penetrate my skin.

"Oh, so *this* was your brilliant plan?" I said nonchalantly as Naano kept stabbing me furiously. "You couldn't come up with anything better?"

"Huh?" My words seemed to have brought Naano back to reality, because it was only at this point that he realized: A) I was still standing; B) I wasn't bleeding anywhere; and C) I hadn't screamed once. Naano looked up at my face, then down at his knife, which didn't have a drop of blood on it.

"What the..." Naano uttered. "My knife *isn't* cutting you up?! But this here is an artifact-class weapon! Are you protecting yourself with a magic item or something?!"

"I already told you, I'm not using any magic items," I said with a sigh. "This way, you can't call me a cheater."

I grabbed Naano's wrist on his right hand—the same hand holding the knife—and squeezed until he squawked in pain like a squashed toad and dropped the weapon. Next, I raised my other hand with my open palm side on, and brought it down in a swift chopping motion on Naano's right elbow. The chop severed the dwarf's arm clean in half, and the remaining stump started gushing blood. But before any of his blood could get on my clothes, I quickly punted Naano far away from me, and he rolled around on the ground, half-screaming, half-sobbing. He eventually crawled over to where I had discarded his severed right

arm and picked it up with his remaining left hand.

"M-My arm!" he wailed. "I make legendary weapons with this aaaaarm!"

Naano's screams were music to my ears, and the dwarf was practically drenched in sweat due to the pain, as well as the realization that he had lost his crafting arm forever.

"Damn you, Light! Damn you to hell!" Naano crowed. "Do you realize what you've just *done*?! You just cut off the arm that makes legendary weapons! Do you realize what you just took from the world? Do you?!"

"What *did* I take from the world?" I said. "You losing an arm won't make any difference to the world. In fact, this is a positive, because nobody has to worry about you murdering them now."

"An amateur like you will never understand!" Naano spat. "Now tell me why my knife didn't run you through. You wearing dragon-scale armor under that shirt?"

"I'm not wearing anything under my shirt," I replied. "My power level is simply too high for you to stab me."

"What? Your power level?" Naano repeated, looking baffled.

I looked the dwarf straight in the eye. "Right now, I'm Level 9999."

"N-No, you're not!" Naano blurted out. "You *can't* be Level 9999! Y-You're just playing mind games with me!"

"No, it's true," I said. "What other reason could there be for you not being able to stab me with your artifact-class knife? Though, yeah, it does mean you didn't have a hope from the start, seeing as how you're only Level 300."

Naano stared at me in silence, his face growing paler and not just because of the pain he was in.

"It was all thanks to my Unlimited Gacha, you see—my Gift you all said was garbage," I continued. "I've been grinding down here at the bottom of the Abyss after you all tried to kill me, and I did so in order to exact revenge on each and every one of you, plus to find out why your nations wanted to hunt for a Master and why they decided to have me assassinated. To that end, I've assembled a whole bunch of allies with power levels that go all the way up to 9999! Behold their might!"

The moment I said these words, Mei, Aoyuki, and Nazuna showed themselves to Naano, as did Iceheat, Mera, Suzu, Nemumu, Gold, the fairy maids, and a whole bunch of other summons and monsters that resided in my underground citadel. They had actually all been present in the training grounds from the very beginning, witnessing the whole exchange between me and Naano from the shadows, but the dwarf hadn't noticed them because their superior power levels allowed them

to hide their presence from him. Now that I had convincingly beaten Naano, there was no need for them to lurk out of sight anymore, and they started to air their own opinions about the dwarf and his prized weapons.

“This must be the heinous criminal who tried to kill Master Light.”

“Seems so. He definitely looks like a hack, even though he’s a dwarf.”

“He has ‘I’m a hack’ written all over his face. He can’t be much of a blacksmith. It won’t matter if he continues trying to improve his skills, because he’ll always be a hack.”

“I heard he was *super* proud of himself for managing to craft a trash artifact-class weapon.”

“We get so many of those trash items down here. I mean, even the other day, I found this artifact-class knife in the kitchen and I told them point-blank that I couldn’t use that piece of junk for my prep. I only use cooking utensils that are epic-class or above to prepare Master Light’s meals.”

“We have more phantasma-class tools than we know what to do with, so why would *anyone* get excited over a stupid *artifact-class* weapon of all things? Garbage-class, more like.”

“And did you hear what kind of trash artifact-class weapon this hack made? It was one of those cursed forbidden swords! All he could craft was this haunted sword that sucked up people’s blood. I mean, seriously, is it even possible to *be* that much of a hack? If I were him, I’d have died of embarrassment long ago!”

“He made a cursed sword that wasn’t just less than useless, it was an actual scourge to regular folk. Who calls that a ‘legendary weapon’? I wouldn’t even have risked putting that sword on a trash heap. It belonged in a toxic waste dump, along with this hack of a blacksmith.”

“If it was such a ‘legendary weapon,’ how come Master Light was able to shatter it with just one strike? We have glass sculptures tougher than that! He must be a special kind of half-wit to be proud of a junk weapon like that.”

“And did you see that knife he was so proud of? It didn’t leave a scratch on Master Light. Some ‘legendary blacksmith.’ I almost wanted to hand him one of our bath sponges to use as a weapon, since at least that would actually scrape Master Light’s skin.”

“He really is a hack among hacks. I can’t believe this shameless clown still gets to breathe the same air as our master. I wish I could fix that right now by ripping him apart with my fingernails. The world would be a much better place without this vomit-inducing loser.”

Naano whimpered helplessly as my allies stared daggers at him and rained insults down on him. It definitely didn’t help matters that

he was one of the eight sworn enemies who had tried to kill me, their beloved dungeon lord, and if I hadn't warned my allies beforehand not to lay a finger on Naano, they probably would have been fighting each other over who'd get to slaughter the dwarf in the most gruesome way possible by now.

"My allies here aren't the only ones who think you're a hopeless hack," I said to Naano, who was still sitting on the ground. "The dwarf king, Dagan, and all the engineers in the Dwarf Kingdom think you're a hack too. Any blacksmith worth their salt knows there's no way to contain a forbidden sword's curse, yet you weren't even aware of that very basic concept. The other dwarves think you're a disgrace to all dwarfkind."

I reached into my pocket and fished out a piece of paper. "The kingdom has decided you must be put to death or worse for killing scores of dwarves and humans. See? We even have the official decree right here, signed by the Dwarf Kingdom and stamped with the royal seal. It says, 'Lord Light shall administer the punishment in its entirety to the criminal known as Naano.'"

Naano grunted and choked when he heard that all the engineers in the Dwarf Kingdom—including the dwarf king himself—were calling him a hack and denying him the glory he thought he deserved. It was finally sinking in that he was about to lose everything that was important to him, and he only had himself to blame, for he had killed a whole bunch of people in an attempt to fulfill a horribly twisted dream of his. Total ruin was the only fate that awaited him.

"It was all over for you the moment you chose the option of fighting me," I stated. "No, scratch that. It was all over the moment you decided to craft a forbidden sword."

"Y-You bunch of freaks!" Naano yelled. He knew there was no way of saving himself from the excruciating pain of his severed arm, nor from the murderous stares my allies were treating him to. But before I put an end to all this, I still needed to ask the dwarf one last thing.

"I know you probably don't know a whole lot, but I'm going to ask you this anyway," I started. "We know that you got the knowledge on how to make a forbidden sword from items given to you by a human merchant by the name of Cavaur. What do you know about him? Spare no details."

"Cavaur? What about him?" Naano said, speaking rapidly under my piercing gaze. "The man's a predatory skunk, but he *did* do a bunch of stuff for me so he could own his own shop. But he was just some trader who brought me whatever materials and slaves I needed! I don't know anything about him beyond that! He's none of my concern and whatever else he got up to is none of my business!"

I wasn't all that disappointed by Naano's answer. After all, Cavaur was a Level 5000 metahuman, so I wouldn't have expected him to treat Naano as an equal. Cavaur had only made contact with Naano after hearing about the annihilation of the White Knights, the appearance of the Great Tower, and the disappearances of Sasha, Sionne, and Garou. Because all of these events had some link to the Concord of the Tribes, Cavaur had sought to use Naano as bait to ensnare us. In the end, Naano was nothing more than a useful pawn to Cavaur, so there was no reason to think the metahuman would have revealed his true identity and objectives to the dwarf.

"Yeah, I figured as much, but I'll get Ellie to rifle through your memories anyway, just to be sure," I said. "A mind probe beats hearing things straight from the horse's mouth, as I like to say."

Naano shrieked at the prospect of having his mind picked over by means of sorcery. As he tried to stanch the end of his stump of an arm with his left hand, Naano gulped and felt his whole body shake with fear, though unlike most of the people I'd captured previously, he still managed to retain a certain air of defiance.

"If you wanna kill me, then just do it already!" Naano shouted. "But the others in our former party are gonna come for you, and don't you forget that! Your end will come, and you'll be shaking in *your* boots when it does, Light! And when that day comes, I'll be waiting down in hell for you and the rest of your fellow freaks!"

"That's not going to happen, Naano," I said. "I'm not going to kill you. At least, not right away."

"L-Light?" The false bravado Naano had displayed mere seconds before melted away in the face of a faint glimmer of hope that he might survive this ordeal. It just went to show that nobody really wanted to die if there was some way to avoid it. Naano was probably willing to accept any kind of punishment I was minded to dish out so long as it meant he got to stay alive, but unfortunately for him, my next words completely dashed his laughably Pollyanna notion.

"I'm not going to kill you right now, because a quick death would be too good for every single one of you lowlifes who tricked and betrayed me," I said, beaming from ear to ear. "You say that our former partymates will come and hunt me down, but wanna know something? You're actually the fourth member of our party that I've captured. You spent so much of your time smithing, you didn't even bother to keep up with the news, did you? Just so you know, you'll be joining Garou, Sasha, and Sionne shortly."

"Wh-What?!" Naano yelled in disbelief.

"Well, naturally, I'm keeping all three of them alive for the time being, and I won't be putting you out of your misery anytime soon either," I continued. "I'm keeping every last one of you scumbags alive

until I know the full truth, and then I'll decide whether or not I should put an end to all of the nonhuman races. So no, I'm not gonna let you die, even if you want to. You'll experience pain so unimaginable, you'll curse your own mother for ever giving birth to you. You'll suffer endlessly in the deepest, darkest pits of the Abyss, with no hope of escape. And fortunately for you, I have hit upon the most fitting way to ensure you will be in unceasing agony."

My smile stretched even wider as I announced the sentence for his crimes. "Naano, making a legendary weapon has been your lifelong dream, yes? In that case, I'll make your dream come true—a billion times over! In the same way that you used living, breathing humans to create that junk sword, your body will be used to make more weapons than you could ever count, and the pain of the process will be much, *much* worse than the deaths you subjected your victims to!"

We'd already retrieved the Book of Forbidden Weapons from Naano's manor, and the plan was to use the instructions in the hefty manual to craft a bunch of swords out of the dwarf's flesh and entrails, making sure to use the most harrowing and traumatic methods spelled out in the tome. As a further precaution, Naano's torturers would also use SSSR High Exorcism cards to stop themselves being driven mad by the weapons they made.

"You'll still be kept alive, no matter how much we eviscerate you," I explained. "We'll be able to cut out your still-beating heart without ever killing you. I'll assign healers who will use the finest restoration potions and cards produced by my Unlimited Gacha on you to make sure you stay alive and continue to suffer. And you'll be conscious throughout the whole ordeal, so feel free to bemoan your fate."

Naano's face had completely blanched by this point, likely because he was starting to fully comprehend the sheer barbarity of the actions he had inflicted on his human victims. He now knew the gravity of the atrocities he had perpetrated, and it looked like he was going to get a taste of his own medicine.

"Y-You sick son of a bitch!" Naano spat. "Are you right in the head? Are you, Light? Ain't there a single shred of decency in your bones?"

"Not for you, there isn't," I retorted, still smiling broadly. "This is the exact same thing you did to all of those innocent humans you killed. The only difference is you'll be alive throughout to enjoy the full horror of it. It's time for you to hitch up your pants and accept what's coming to you. I hope you suffer dearly for your actions to the bitter end. Take him away!"

My allies practically threw themselves on Naano as if someone had opened the gates of hell and unleashed dark minions to drag him

to his final destination. Naano tried to run, of course, but a Level 300 dwarf was never going to escape the clutches of my allies when even the fairy maids had higher power levels than him. Naano squealed like a stuck pig as he wrestled his captors in vain.

“Heeelp!” Naano cried out. “Light, save me! Liiight! I don’t deserve this! I didn’t do anything wrooong!”

Between them, my allies both big and small grabbed hold of his hair, feet, shoulders, waist, and what remained of his arms. Everyone in the throng hated Naano with a wrath so fierce it could melt iron, and it was like witnessing a bunch of zombies setting upon a lone straggler before they eventually dragged the dwarf away to the darkest parts of the Abyss in order to start tormenting him according to my specifications. Naano did his best to resist and screamed throughout, his shrieks of anguish making me smile again in spite of myself. His screams were more pleasing to my ears than a symphony performed by a full orchestra, and seeing Naano’s face oozing with tears, snot, and saliva as he begged me to spare him warmed my heart immensely.

“Lemme go! Nooo!” Naano howled. “Light, spare me! At least lemme craft one more sword! Just one! A *real* legendary sword this time! Don’t do this to me! Don’t turn me into a bunch of swords! Don’t torture me like this...”

Naano’s voice eventually faded away as the shadows consumed him, the dwarf never to be heard from again. My allies had even taken away Naano’s severed arm and the knife he had tried to stab me with, bringing an end to yet another chapter of my lengthy vendetta.

Chapter 13: Deliberations

I had gotten my revenge on Naano, and I couldn't have done it without my allies in the Abyss, nor the aid of the Dwarf Kingdom. After all, it had been the kingdom's authorities that had ordered the relocation of the slums' residents so that no innocent people would get hurt while we attempted to capture Naano and Cavaur. I also needed to thank Princess Lilith for suggesting I engage diplomatically with the leader of the Dwarf Kingdom.

As for Cavaur, he was proving to be a pretty valuable source of information. At this moment in time, Ellie was giving me the rundown on Cavaur's memory probe as I scanned her written report in my personal office in the Abyss.

"I started off by probing Mr. Naano's memories to see if he had any important info on Mr. Cavaur or Masters, but I'm afraid there was no new intelligence to be gleaned on that front," Ellie said, standing in front of my desk. The Forbidden Witch had scanned Naano's memories from his first meeting with Cavaur to the present day, but the info obtained either matched what we already knew or held little value to begin with.

"However, my probe of Mr. Cavaur's mind has generated many new pieces of information, Blessed Lord," Ellie continued.

"You can say that again. This is a *lot* of new info," I remarked, looking down at Ellie's report. "So Cavaur wasn't a real Master, but a pseudo-Master created in an old failed experiment. The person who cobbled him together is called 'Hisomi,' but Cavaur has never seen his creator in person. In fact, he's operated alone from the very beginning, never meeting any of his handlers. This suggests a near certainty that we're dealing with more than one Master, huh?"

The fact that we had all but confirmed the existence of multiple Masters with this new information wasn't the only thing that had caught my attention.

"These Masters have been working on three projects, one of which was the so-called 'Avatar Project,'" I continued. "The Avatar Project had sought to make a magic item that could project the user's thoughts and memories onto a living dummy that the user could operate remotely from a secure location. The project ended in failure, but Cavaur—a pseudo-Master created through the experiments—was repurposed to serve as an intelligence operative. The specifics of the

other two projects remain unknown...”

I paused to contemplate what I’d just read. “I wonder what other projects these Masters have been working on.”

“They are certain to be highly unsavory projects, in my humble opinion,” Ellie said, her brow knitted. “After all, they were willing to go to such monstrous extremes to create a creature like Mr. Cavaur.”

At a minimum, the Avatar Project had caused more than one thousand humans to be dismembered in the name of experimentation, according to the info that had been picked out of Cavaur’s memories. Reading that factoid in Ellie’s report turned my stomach.

“Furthermore, these Masters are highly secretive, to the point where they have left no trace of the laboratory that gave birth to Mr. Cavaur,” Ellie said. “They regularly communicate with Mr. Cavaur through a magic item buried in his forehead to further ensure that all their communications were kept secret. Because of that, Mr. Cavaur has never seen the person he speaks to telepathically, meaning we don’t have the first clue where to look for these Masters. It’s unbelievable how single-minded they are about their secrecy.”

Ellie had been the first one to notice after the battle that Cavaur was using a communication implant, so instead of taking him to the Abyss, she had suggested detaining him in the Great Tower instead. Since our new foes already knew about the tower, we had little to lose if Cavaur somehow managed to leak his location to the Masters.

“I wish I could identify who these Masters are, but at this point, all I can do is pray to the stars for help,” Ellie sighed.

If the superwitch said she was unable to locate the Masters, it was a pretty good bet that nobody else could. Ellie had tried to dig deeper into Cavaur’s memories, but because the Flesh Zombie had been created by stitching a whole bunch of people together, the memories of those victims had started to get muddled in. Whatever critical information we had obtained regarding these Masters had come entirely from surface-level knowledge pulled from Cavaur’s head, and there was nothing we could do to verify the findings.

“I sorely regret being too powerless to be able to bring you the kind of information that would meet your expectations, Blessed Lord Light,” the witch said dolefully.

“You don’t have to apologize, Ellie,” I replied. “You’ve brought me lots of good info. The only drawback is it’s the kind that raises even more questions. Our next priority is to use this info as leads to get answers to those questions.”

I wasn’t saying that just to cheer Ellie up. Sure, there were a whole bunch of questions Cavaur’s memories *hadn’t* answered (We still didn’t know who C and his followers were. Were these suspected Masters searching for C? What other projects were the Masters

working on, besides the Avatar Project? We knew the name of one of these Masters—Hisomi—but how many of them were there, and what kind of powers were they packing?), but despite all of these questions, I think we had made huge progress in terms of the amount of intelligence we had accumulated.

“Anyway, since it doesn’t seem like Cavaur is gonna give us any more useful info, you can start putting him through a whole world of suffering, like I promised we would up on the surface,” I said to Ellie.

“As you wish, Blessed Lord,” Ellie replied with a giggle. “I’ve already implanted artificial nerve endings into his body so that he is able to experience the same pain he inflicted on all of the people he has victimized, based on the memories of his slaughter. Since he needs to resort to cannibalism to maintain the integrity of his body, I took it upon myself to start early before it was too late.”

“Nice work, Ellie,” I said. “You never waste any time when it comes to getting a job done.”

“It’s always an honor to receive kind words from you, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said.

“And just so we’re clear, we’re not gonna be feeding him anything to prevent him from wasting away,” I said. “Just make sure he suffers until he dies naturally.”

“As you command, Your Blessedness,” Ellie replied.

There was something else in Ellie’s report that had caught my eye: the slave traders Cavaur bought his and Naano’s victims from. They belonged to an organized gang that kidnapped travelers and adventurers, and even went as far as attacking entire villages and towns just to get their hands on fresh human slaves. Apparently, this particular ring sold slaves to buyers who would otherwise have trouble purchasing humans from normal slave markets, due to what they had in mind for the slaves.

“It looks like there’s a criminal ring that abducts people illegally and sells them off as slaves, and Cavaur had ties to these guys,” I said. “They need to be put out of commission permanently. And everyone who has ever done business with these criminals must pay the price for all the blood on their hands. Do not show *any* mercy.”

“As you wish, Blessed Lord Light,” Ellie replied, and she curtsied with a captivating smile splashed across her face. “I will see to it that those miscreants are dealt with without delay.”

I nodded my satisfaction at Ellie’s response. Not only had we gotten a whole bunch of information from Cavaur, we had forged an ironclad alliance with the Dwarf Kingdom after helping them to explore the vast ruins in their domain, and from those ruins, we had recovered a load of valuable documents, as well as some low-class magic weapons. Since the dwarves had only been interested in

conducting research—of any kind, it seemed—they had gladly given us first dibs on certain documents and magic weapons. We had also signed an agreement which meant we would be the first to be told of the results of the research the dwarves were conducting, though I figured it would probably take a good while for the dwarves to find out anything useful regarding the Stone Golems, the artificial sea, and the mythical-class Snakething from the documents we had left behind. For one thing, they were written in a language that was too difficult to decipher.

In any case, what my side wanted to know above all else was whether advanced ancient technology really had “destroyed” the world, and whether there was an entity even more powerful than a Master. We believed the dragonutes and the demonkin were the ones sitting on these secrets, and we had explored the ruins to see if we could uncover some clues to help us solve these mysteries without needing to engage either race. But as it stood presently, we had emerged from the ruins pretty much none the wiser. We might end up finding out something from all the research that was ongoing, but that didn’t change the fact that we were still stuck back at square one.

Well, that wasn’t strictly true. We had found something of value in the ruins: the altarpiece in that church, the left half of which had Snakethings banding together with members of the nine races, while in the center were a number of people who might have been Masters acting as the vanguard of this army that was engaging the enemy. On the right side of the painting, there had been a whole bunch of monsters spewing forth from the gaping maw of what seemed to be some kind of archfiend. Dagan had brought up the theory that some kind of godlike figure might have been responsible for destroying the ancient civilization, and I had a hunch that this archfiend in the painting may well have been the evil god in question.

Furthermore, we had found out about the existence of artificially created mythical-class weapons after we encountered and fought one. On top of that, we were able to obtain a whole bunch of magic items and research materials. And if you overlooked all the monsters that were in it, the underground sea was such an awesome sight, I’d wanted to show it to Yume and everyone else in the Abyss. I’d say it had been worth exploring those multitiered ancient ruins just for those reasons alone. And there was also another thing.

Is this ‘C’ character Cavour was babbling about that thing in the painting with the gaping, fang-filled maw? I pondered. Whatever the case, it strongly suggested there really was an entity out there even more powerful than a Master. Cavour himself was a Level 5000 “pseudo-Master” that had been created by a Master, and apparently both Cavour and this Master were on the lookout for C. And not only

that, but C had a bunch of followers, which I knew because Cavaur had suspected me of being one of them. And based on what the Flesh Zombie had said during our confrontation, C was capable of manipulating people without them even knowing. I'd personally never heard of or seen anything resembling a "C," but Cavaur seemed to treat this persona as a real threat.

Circling back to the altarpiece where those Masters were leading an army against a swarm of monsters, it would make total sense if someone had told me the mouth expelling all of those evil creatures had belonged to C. *But something feels off about that notion*, I thought. *I can't quite put my finger on what, but I can't shake the feeling...*

I had no way of explaining why I had these doubts. It was like one or two things weren't adding up but the substance of them had gone completely over my head. I was busy racking my brain to try and hit on what these missing pieces might be when a knock at my office door interrupted my train of thought. A fairy maid waiting at the back of the room opened the door a crack to ask who was knocking. She closed the door again and approached my desk.

"Miss Nazuna wishes to speak with you, Master Light," the fairy maid informed me. "Would you like me to let her in?"

"Nazuna's here?" I asked.

"Yes, Master Light," the fairy maid said. "It appears the matter concerns Miss Yume."

"Yume?" I repeated, perking up. "Okay, yeah, bring her in."

Nazuna served as Yume's bodyguard whenever she had time in her schedule to look after her. I wasn't sure if it was because they were both on the same wavelength, but Nazuna has become Yume's closest friend—besides me, of course. The maid glided swiftly over to the door to open it, and Nazuna stepped into my office with a super-anxious look on her face.

Nazuna spoke first. "Master, can I talk to ya for a sec?"

"Yeah, sure thing," I said. "You said you wanted to talk about Yume. Has something happened?"

"Your little sister misses ya so much, she's started crying," Nazuna said. "I know yer busy and all, but is there any way ya can take a break and go see her? In return, I'll work harder to help ya out with yer work so ya can spend more time with yer li'l sister!"

Nazuna looked like she was ready to fight the Goddess herself just to make Yume happy again, and when it came to combat, nobody was a match for Nazuna. Though when it came to intelligence-gathering, running the Abyss, or even relaying an order to any of my three other lieutenants, I simply couldn't see Nazuna performing those tasks adequately. That wasn't to belittle Nazuna in any way; it's just that everyone has their strengths and weaknesses.

I smiled politely at her determination. “Thanks, Nazuna, for offering to help me. And you’re right that I’ve been so busy lately dealing with the dwarves that I haven’t managed to spend any time with Yume. But now that I’ve pretty much wrapped up this briefing, I promise I’ll go see her next.”

Admittedly, ever since I’d spirited Yume away from the Human Kingdom, I hadn’t spent all that much time with my baby sister—if any at all—and it sounded like she was at the end of her rope. On hearing me promise to go to her, Nazuna’s expression softened.

“D’ya mean it, master?” Nazuna said hopefully. “You really are the best! In that case, I’ll go tell li’l sis that big brother’s comin’ to play!”

Nazuna rushed out of my office all smiles and ran down the hallway so fast, I could hear the pitter-patter of her retreating feet from where I was sitting. I guessed she must have been heading for Yume’s bedroom. Ellie put a hand up to her head in exasperation at Nazuna’s painfully inelegant exit, and I chuckled awkwardly.

“Yes, Ellie, I know how you feel. But Nazuna’s trying to look out for my sister, so don’t think too badly of her,” I said.

“I defer to your judgment, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said. “But I believe we should educate Nazuna on basic etiquette. She has no right to be acting so inappropriately in your presence!”

Thankfully, Ellie wasn’t *really* angry at Nazuna. She was only saying these things in the way a loving parent would about a wayward child. I decided to change the subject to clear the air.

“Here’s an idea,” I said. “Why don’t we invite some more people to join us on our visit to Yume? We can all have tea and relax a bit after the craziness of the past few weeks.”

“Understood, your Blessedness,” Ellie replied. “But after the tea, I will personally lecture Nazuna on her behavior. Don’t go thinking I will let you get away with this, Nazuna...”

Unfortunately, instead of the air being cleared, Ellie had started rehearsing the words she would say to Nazuna once she had managed to collar her. Knowing Nazuna was doomed no matter what I said on the matter, I rose from my chair with a rueful grin on my face and left the office with Ellie in tow. As we strolled in the direction of Yume’s private chambers, we contacted the others via Telepathy and told them to come join us on our surprise visit. I intended to have a nice, relaxing tea party so that I could forget all about the hectic days I had spent questing with dwarves and exacting my payback.

Epilogue

The Dragonute Empire made up the eastern half of the mainland, and the reason the nation called itself an “empire” was because it considered the Principality of the Nine its colony. The upper section of the nation was home to the world’s biggest untamed forest, while the lower part was a mix of farmland and cities. This wild forest encircled the Abyss, the world’s largest and deadliest dungeon, though the mass of trees also served as a natural barrier to the adjacent nations, and as the Dragonute Empire bordered the ocean on the other side, this meant there was almost no easy way to enter the nation from outside. The empire was a highly reclusive power, making it the biggest blank spot among all of the nine nations in terms of what was known about its internal affairs.

At an undisclosed location somewhere in the Dragonute Empire, four people who looked like humans had assembled for a meeting. One seemed to be a slim, average-looking man who was roughly 170 centimeters tall. His only distinguishing features were his perpetually squinting eyes and his manufactured smile. In fact, this man looked like an exact copy of Cavaur, aside from the fact that he wasn’t wearing a bandanna and he went by the name of Hisomi. He began proceedings by updating the other three people present about his activities, his voice betraying a slightly irritated kind of weariness not unlike a financier who had taken a bath on an investment.

“I am no longer receiving regular contact from Cavaur,” Hisomi stated. “As you all know, he was the product of the failed Avatar Project that I redeployed as an intelligence agent. My assumption is that Cavaur has been captured and killed while on his latest operation.”

“Are you absolutely certain Cavaur hasn’t simply forgotten to report in? Or that the locals or some random monsters haven’t put him temporarily out of commission?” asked a second speaker.

“I can safely rule out those possibilities, Lord Hiro,” Hisomi replied. “Cavaur has never failed to keep in contact with me at regular intervals, even if he has been delayed from time to time. And although he is a reject from the Avatar Project, he was pieced together out of high-level human adventurers and other male humans in good health. I also raised Cavaur’s power level to 5000 by using my Gift, the Kindred Maker, to share my own level with him. His elevated power

level should make him impervious to any creature, sentient or otherwise.”

Hiro was dressed in resplendent attire that made him look like he was about to play the part of a prince on stage. If anyone else had been wearing this outfit, they would have looked sorely out of place, but Hiro was one of the few people in the whole world who could pull off the look. He was tall, and his facial features were not so much handsome as beautiful, like a woman’s, and even with his extravagant clothing, it was clear to see that he was slim but solidly built, with hardly any body fat. In fact, Hiro radiated such a regal aura that if he were to stand side by side with Clowe, the crown prince of the Human Kingdom, anyone looking at the pair would declare Hiro to be the real prince.

Hiro sighed shallowly at Hisomi’s response. “So our true rivals were none other than *those* subjects, it appears. The fact the dwarf called Naano has also disappeared seems to confirm this.”

“There is a high likelihood of that being the case, but I believe it is still too early to determine that for definite,” Hisomi said. “We cannot preclude the possibility that the worshippers might be misdirecting us.”

“Hey, Squintface! Don’t you dare go elevating those crazies to the level of ‘worshippers!’” shouted a third speaker. “In case you forgot, they’re out there praying for doomsday! Hell, we should be calling them a delusional death cult instead!”

“I will ask you to compose yourself, Kaizer,” Hiro said, stretching out his hands and making a gesture for him to simmer down. “I concur with your observations completely, but it isn’t right to project your understandable frustrations onto one of your comrades.”

Kaizer was a shirtless blond male who was wearing what looked like work pants. He was also sporting an impressive range of accessories, including a necklace, bracelets, piercings, and rings, most if not all of which were made of gold. It was as if he had stumbled across a pile of treasure deep in a dungeon and decided he would wear all of it. Unlike Hiro, Kaizer actually glowed with all the jewelry he was wearing, and because Kaizer was tall, lean, and muscular, the trinkets strangely suited his physique. Since Kaizer felt and looked very comfortable in these adornments, people naturally assumed he was royalty instead of just some eccentric.

Hisomi shrugged before continuing. “In any case, we can safely assume that Cavaur has met his end. I had been receiving regular messages from him before, but no other information beyond that. I could guess at a number of various causes of death, but we will need to carry out an on-the-ground investigation to confirm any conjecture. Since I cannot conduct a proper probe into it on my own, I would

appreciate any assistance you are able to supply me with.”

“I’d offer to help out if I could, but I’m presently occupied with negotiations, along with some other tasks,” Hiro said.

“Hell, I can lend you a hand,” Kaizer piped up. “As long as you get someone else to do *my* job for me, of course.”



“But Kaizer, if you pull out now, all work on P.A. will grind to a halt,” Hisomi replied in a comedically pleading voice. “It does not matter how important the Second Project is, our first priority is P.A., and we all know you are the only one who can lead it.”

Both Hiro and Kaizer chuckled at Hisomi’s rather campy remark, since they were both in on the joke that no one other than Kaizer could spearhead P.A., for reasons obvious to those assembled. Once the laughter of this shared lighthearted moment had died down, the trio shifted their gaze to the other participant in the discussion, who had remained silent up to this point.

“Hei, would you mind aiding me in this assignment?” Hisomi asked this fourth figure.

Dressed head to toe in black, Hei’s proximity to Kaizer meant he seemed to blend in with the shadow cast by the bespangled man’s golden aura. Even Hei’s eyes were covered by a strip of black cloth that was tied behind his head, its lengthy ends dangling all the way down his back. Hei didn’t immediately answer Hisomi’s question, choosing instead to leave a pregnant pause.

“I refuse,” Hei uttered finally. “My task is to protect Kaizer.”

“Who the hell would be dumb enough to try to lay a hand on me?!” Kaizer yelled.

“There’s no guarantee they won’t,” Hei replied simply. “You will not die again. Not on my watch.”

Kaizer turned his head away with an annoyed click of his tongue. “Just can’t let go of the past, can you?”

Despite Kaizer’s protests, Hei still stuck to the gold-bedecked man as if he were his shadow. Fully aware of the nature of the relationship between Kaizer and Hei, Hiro and Hisomi could only exchange glances with a knowing silence.

“What about Cherry Bomber or Octopus Head?” Kaizer suggested. “Can’t we lend either of those two to Hisomi?”

“I’m loath to remove them from P.A. at this moment in time,” Hiro said. “It would bring the project to a complete standstill.”

“In other words, it appears I will have to complete this assignment by myself,” Hisomi sighed. “Ah, if only I had *some* help...”

Kaizer clicked his tongue again. “Gathering intelligence and moving projects along would be much easier if those damn lizards weren’t so useless.”

Kaizer and the other Masters operated under the patronage of the dragonutes, the most powerful race in the world, but because the Dragonute Empire was so isolated—both geographically and by political design—dragonute citizens seldom traveled abroad. Young dragonutes intent on seeing the world did occasionally strike out

beyond the borders, usually ending up as adventurers or merchants, but the singularly unique appearance of their race made them stand out too much to conduct any cloak-and-dagger activities outside of the empire. Of course, the dragonutes could easily go outside of their own race to hire agents to conduct clandestine missions, but the fact still remained that dragonutes were generally the wrong fit for missions that required absolute secrecy.

Hiro sighed and shrugged. "For now, we shall investigate the Dwarf Kingdom and confirm the disappearance of Naano. If he has indeed gone missing, it is further evidence that those connected to the false Master are being eliminated sequentially, as seen with what happened to Garou, Sasha, and Sionne. Their disappearances were no coincidence and might have had something to do with the Great Tower that suddenly appeared. If we consider those events in their proper context, it would strongly imply that the false Master is behind these events, and that this false Master may either be C or one of C's disciples. With that said, I wish to put forward a proposal."

Hiro paused as he surveyed the eyes that were all trained on him, then laid out his idea in a businesslike fashion.

"Let's send the beastfolk up against the tower, shall we?"

Extra Story 1: Iceheat's Inner Feelings

"Light and his friends must've started exploring that dungeon by now," Annelia reflected. "I hope my sweet little guy doesn't get a big owie."

"Dear sister, I do hope you do not have a mind to travel to the dungeon to protect our Creator yourself," Alth warned her. "I am worried about him too, but we still have work we have to do later on today."

"My gosh, Alth! Your big sister would *never* do anything as irresponsible as abandoning our work," Annelia pouted, her cheeks puffed out. "After all, my special little kiddo gave me that job."

Annelia and Alth were presently standing in the cafeteria, holding trays loaded with a late lunch. As administrators of one of the busiest sections of the Abyss, the Card Repository, their workload basically dictated when they could eat their meals, and that was generally later than everyone else. Even though Annelia insisted that she was committed to her work as the repository's head Card Keeper, she would've jumped at the chance to accompany Light on his quest to explore the Dwarf Kingdom ruins if asked. She would have gallantly protected Light and her other dear "kiddos" from monsters, and they in turn would have proclaimed their love and gratitude for their amazing "big sister." However, her job at the Card Repository was every bit as important to her, since Light had entrusted her with that duty, and even though the work of sorting, warehousing, and distributing gacha cards happened largely behind the scenes, Annelia derived a certain satisfaction from knowing that she was maintaining a high quality of life for her legions of "kiddos" in the Abyss. As her younger brother, Alth, knew, Annelia would never ditch her regular job on a whim, but he felt he needed to air his concerns, just to be sure.

"Forgive me, dear sister," Alth said. "I know how dedicated you are to our duties."

"Alth, bud, you're usually so nice, but y'know, sometimes, you can be a real big meanie."

Annelia suddenly spotted a familiar face sitting at the far end of the nearly empty cafeteria. "Iceheat!" she called out to the maid. "I can't believe I'm seeing you here at this time of day, hun!"

“Oh, you’re here too, Annelia and Alth?” Iceheat had been sipping her after-meal tea when Annelia noticed her. Annelia sat down next to Iceheat, all smiles, while Alth took a seat on the bench opposite them.

“So how are you *doing*, sweetie?” Annelia asked. “Remember, if you ever need anything, come tell your big sister all about it. Don’t be shy!”

Annelia considered herself the elder sister of everyone who resided in the dungeon, even if the “kiddo” in question was older than her or had a superior power level. Iceheat, the Level 7777 grappler maid, had a long history of rebuffing the Level 5000 Card Keeper’s well-meaning but somewhat patronizing way of talking to people.

“For the record, I myself do not view you as an older sister that I can personally confide in,” Iceheat stated. “And it’s not out of shyness. It is purely due to my own preferences.”

“Honey, you really don’t have to be so shy around me,” Annelia persisted.

“Dear sister, I believe we should park that particular discussion,” Alth prompted. “But if I may echo my sister’s observation, it is quite unusual to see you in here having lunch at this hour, Miss Iceheat.”

Picking up on Iceheat’s annoyance, Alth had attempted to steer the conversation in a different direction, and his gambit seemed to work, for the grappler maid almost instantly perked up and a somewhat haughty expression appeared on her face.

“I imagine you will have heard that Master Light is exploring a set of vast underground ruins as we speak,” Iceheat said. “Because Master Light chose Miss Mei to accompany him on his quest, I was appointed to oversee the entirety of the Abyss in her absence, and my additional responsibilities have kept me rather occupied, to say the least.”

In other words, Iceheat’s workload had kept her busy to the point that she had to take a late lunch. But instead of looking exhausted, the maid seemed to be exceedingly proud that she’d had her duties temporarily expanded. Annelia and Alth both immediately understood why Iceheat was brimming with self-satisfaction.

“I see. So that is why you are eating late,” Alth said. “In any case, I can think of no person better suited to taking over Miss Mei’s tasks than you, Miss Iceheat.”

“Way to go, kiddo!” Annelia added cheerily. “If you ever need help taking care of business, I’m always around to give you a hand, sweetie.”

Basking in their sincere praise, Iceheat decided to tone down her outward display of hubris as she sipped her tea again. “It’s only because Miss Mei constantly instructs me on the maid’s code. Thanks to her expert tutelage, everything continues to run smoothly in the Abyss.”

“There’s no need to be so modest, honey,” Annelia told her. “You deserve this job because of all the hard work you have put in day after day under my kiddo, Mei.”

“I’m not being modest. I merely speak the truth,” Iceheat replied, though despite what she said, it was easy to tell that Iceheat was enjoying being showered with praise for her efforts, which helped the maid to forget about her initial awkward exchange with Annelia and simply enjoy this amiable mealtime chat.

Alth took a bite of his sandwich. “If you had not needed to take the place of Miss Mei here, you would likely have been selected to join our Creator on his quest in the ruins. I do not mean to repeat what my sister says each time, but I would also have liked to have been chosen for that quest. I am envious of Mr. Jack for that reason.”

“I think you two would’ve been well-qualified to accompany Master Light on his journey,” Iceheat replied. “In fact, I myself believe your posts at the Card Repository are more critical than my role as the dungeon’s interim supervisor. There is no reason for you to compare yourselves unfavorably to anyone.”

Iceheat was attempting to make Alth feel better, but she did have a point. The Abyss would be able to hum along reasonably well for several days without an administrator at the top overseeing everything, and if a situation absolutely called for one, Ellie could always step in and perform double duty as the lead supervisor of both the Abyss and the Great Tower. But being a Card Keeper was an entirely different proposition. Annelia and Alth possessed skill sets nobody else could replicate, which meant if they were to abandon the Card Repository for even a few days, the Abyss would cease to function due to the massive backlog in replenishing the necessary supplies.

Annelia smiled graciously as she ate her omelet rice. “Why, thank you for that compliment, hun. You’re so sweet!”

“I speak nothing but the truth as I see it,” Iceheat stated. “As for myself, I’m fully aware how crucial my current duties are. However, I’m the only Level 7777 summon that hasn’t accompanied Master Light, and I’m mildly dejected about that, so I can understand how you would feel envious—”

Annelia and Alth both stared agog at Iceheat. Perhaps it was the mix of a sociable atmosphere, the discussions regarding their crucial roles, and the delicious food and tea being consumed, but Iceheat—the strict disciplinarian—was finally speaking from the heart and opening up to people. Or from Iceheat’s perspective, she had accidentally let slip her true feelings. Whatever the reason, it didn’t really matter, as wide-eyed with excitement, Annelia was primed and ready to comfort her little kiddo who was feeling jealous and dejected

about being left behind. Iceheat realized her gaffe as soon as she saw the thrilled expression on Annelia's face and cut herself off midsentence with the intention of backtracking, but the damage had already been done.

"Yes! Yes! I know awfully, *awfully* well what it's like to be envious of my little kiddos!" Annelia agreed, her eyes twinkling like a starry sky.

"No, I didn't mean it like tha—" Iceheat started to protest, but Annelia interrupted her.

"It's *okay*, sweetie! Your big sister knows *exactly* how you feel!" Annelia sympathized. "I know we can't just abandon our duties and follow Light to that dungeon, but once we're done with work, we should have a pajama party! We can drink tea, eat treats, and have oodles of fun!"

Iceheat knew Annelia meant well by inviting her to a pajama party to cheer her up—even if it was just because of a slip of the tongue—and for that reason, Iceheat was hesitant to puncture the Card Keeper's enthusiasm by refusing the offer out of hand, but she was unable to come up with the right words to say to let her down gently, so she glanced in Alth's direction for help. Unfortunately for her, Alth turned his face away with an apologetic expression on his face, indicating there was nothing even he could do once Annelia's "big sister" switch had been flicked on. Knowing there was no way out, Iceheat finally came out with a rather half-hearted answer.

"I-I still have a vast amount of work to do..." Iceheat stammered. "But if I do ever get finished with it all, well..."

"Then it's settled!" Annelia announced, speaking rapidly. "Whenever you get done, come to me and I'll have it all set up! In fact, I'll even come and help you out once I'm done with all of my work so that we can throw the party as soon as possible! Ah, I can't *believe* we're having a pajama party! There's so much I have to get ready, like the treats, and the tea, and some new sheets! I'll make sure we have matching pajamas too. Oh, and aroma oil! And, and..."

Annelia was in full "big sister" mode by this point, and all Iceheat could do was finish her tea with an air of resignation, while Alth chomped away at the last of his sandwiches to hide the pained grin on his face.

Extra Story 2: Mera Complains

Mera and Iceheat were sitting in the cafeteria drinking whiskey close to midnight one night, and to a casual observer, they were an especially odd pairing, given Mera's elongated frame and Iceheat's red-and-blue hair. Mera was the one who had invited Iceheat to drink with her, and the two whiskey glasses were filled with vintage amber-colored liquor that Mera had paid for out of her own pocket, with the round chunks of ice in the glasses coming courtesy of Iceheat's powers. As for Iceheat, she had just finished taking her after-work bath when Mera had told her she needed to talk over some drinks, so Iceheat had come along wearing her standard maid uniform. The topic of their conversation was Mera's anxieties.

The chimera chuckled glumly. "I'm so weak. Unbelievably weak."

"What makes you say that?" Iceheat said. "I mean, if *you're* weak, that would make almost everyone else in the Abyss functionally bedridden by comparison."

"Yeah, I know it might sound ridiculous, but it's something I haven't been able to get out of my head after questing through those ruins," Mera explained. The chimera had just returned from accompanying Light and Dagan the dwarf king on a journey through a vast set of uncharted ruins that the Dwarf Kingdom had kept under wraps for centuries. The experience had left her feeling inadequate, and she sought to give voice to her insecurities to her best friend, Iceheat. Although tea was Iceheat's preferred choice of beverage, she had made an exception for Mera this time around by sharing a bottle of whiskey with her.

"From what I myself heard about the quest in the ruins, you contributed admirably, Mera," Iceheat said, comforting her friend. "Why would you consider yourself weak? Even Master Light himself was singing your praises."

Iceheat had served as the Abyss's interim chief administrator during Light and Mei's absence, and on his return, Light had briefed her on what had transpired during the quest. In that rundown, Light had mentioned several times how Mera had done an "awesome" job of carrying out reconnaissance on each floor, as well as safeguarding the explorers from a whole range of threats. Despite being told of Light's genuine commendation of her contribution, Mera sadly raised her sleeve-covered hand to her mouth and tipped back the whiskey glass,

draining the contents, before filling the glass up again with more whiskey, snickering softly as she did so.

“I suppose the master is right in a way,” Mera reflected. “I think I gave a good account of myself against the Stone Golems and that man-made sea, as well as in that last underground tier with all those houses. But I was totally useless against that mythical-class weapon we encountered on that one floor.”

“Snakething”—which was the nickname given to it by Light’s team—had been a sentient war machine that the group had found lurking around on the third underground tier. This living weapon had possessed the ability to bend reality by etherealizing itself, and by utilizing this skill, it was able to sneak up on Light’s team without triggering the senses of the Level 9999 or Level 7777 warriors. Snakething was also able to repurpose its demolecularization powers into energy blasts that could completely vaporize its intended target, and they even worked on surfaces made of a material that was harder than diamond. The only people who had been able to go toe to toe with Snakething were Nazuna with her own mythical-class weapon, Prometheus, and Light, who managed to figure out Snakething’s vulnerabilities.

“Master took me on that quest because he believed in me and my skills,” Mera bemoaned, slumped in her seat in the cafeteria. “But when he was in real danger facing that Snakething, I was worse than useless. Only a pathetic failure like me could be so weak...”

“I think I see now why you’re despairing,” Iceheat said. Although Mera was usually quite a sassy person, she was just like all of Light’s other gacha summons in that she was more than willing to lay down her life for the young dungeon lord. What Mera feared worse than death, however, was being a liability to her beloved master. In her eyes, it was better to end her own life than to cause any sort of harm to Light or hinder him in any way. Iceheat sympathized greatly with Mera’s pain because she valued her own service to Light just as much as her associate did.

“But Suzu couldn’t even touch the weapon with her bullets and Nazuna sensed that Jack wouldn’t have been able to withstand its energy blasts,” Iceheat reasoned. “Your inability to engage that machine was totally beyond your control. In any case, we’re permanently capped at our assigned power levels, which means we’re unable to attain more strength than we already have.”

“Yeah, and that’s what’s killing me,” Mera said with a despairing chuckle. “If I had the ability to level up, I would’ve asked Miss Ellie to let me battle monsters using her Koshmar Summon a long time ago.”

The Koshmar Summon was an advanced spell that created an interdimensional bridge to other worlds that allowed high-level

monsters to enter onto this plane of existence. Light had used this ultimate-class spell to make it up to Level 9999, but Unlimited Gacha summons such as Mera and Iceheat were seemingly unable to raise their current levels, no matter how many monsters they fought. This was, however, merely an informal rule that Light's summons had identified, as limitations like that were not explicitly stated anywhere.

"If Miss Nazuna hadn't been there, master would have been forced to deal with Snakething by himself," Mera said, grinding her teeth. "I wasn't able to protect our master or anyone else from those energy blasts, and if worse had come to worst, I could've been completely atomized in the process of attempting to."

Mera was indeed describing the worst-case scenario, because as a chimera, she could theoretically have defeated Snakething by spawning a whole army of creatures to overwhelm the weapon, though due to the way Snakething could unleash a flurry of demolecularizing energy blasts, the odds of Mera winning with this tactic were sadly not all that high, and even if she did emerge victorious, it would be at a near disastrous cost for herself.

Mera cackled somberly. "But take Miss Nazuna: she didn't even need to use her full strength to beat Snakething. Sure, she needed master's help right at the end, but her power level and her class of weapon are so unreachable, it kills me."

Even though Snakething had given Nazuna a decent amount of trouble late in their battle by going entirely on the defensive, Nazuna had clearly been the more dominant of the two from beginning to end. Furthermore, Nazuna was indeed capable of unleashing a lot more destructive power than her battle with Snakething suggested.

"You shouldn't compare yourself to Miss Nazuna," Iceheat said with a sigh. "We Level 7777s wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance against her in battle, even if all four of us joined forces to take her on."

Mera laughed again. "I still have bruises that can attest to that, hun. But even so..."

Mera was simply unable to look past how much she was outclassed as a fighter by Nazuna, and it also applied to Ellie, Aoyuki, and Mei, due to their overpowered abilities. Light was the only exception, because Mera couldn't imagine laying a finger on her beloved master, even in a mock battle.

"I wanna get more powerful for master," Mera declared.

"The only way for us to boost our abilities is with a magic item," Iceheat said. "Perhaps we could borrow the Prometheus from Miss Nazuna?"

"But Miss Nazuna is the only one who can wield that sword," mused Mera. "And I know she's the generous type and all, but even

she wouldn't relinquish the Prometheus to just anyone, would she?"

Both Mera and Iceheat found themselves suddenly unsure whether or not Nazuna was actually all that protective of her mythical-class weapon. The two women could easily picture Nazuna going "Sure! Here ya go!" if they asked to use the Prometheus. Of course, this wasn't because they saw Nazuna—who, it must be noted, was their superior—as an impetuous soul who didn't know the value of such a powerful weapon, but because she could sometimes be a little *too* generous for her own good. Mera and Iceheat both believed in their heart of hearts that this was where their doubts about Nazuna's potential actions came from, and they refused to consider any other possible interpretations.

Mera chortled. "In that case, perhaps I should ask master for permission to wield one of the seven mythical-class weapons he has in his arsenal."

"I myself can't in good conscience endorse that idea," Iceheat remarked. "Those weapons unleash too much power for us to handle, or they're too risky in other respects. Master Light wouldn't readily agree to that request either, I imagine."

The Unlimited Gacha had produced a total of seven mythical-class weapons in the course of three years—not counting the Prometheus since Nazuna had been summoned with the sword. However, brandishing these weapons came at a high cost to any wielder below a certain power level, so Light had placed those weapons under lock and key, only to be used as a future contingency measure.

With a dour expression on her face, Mera downed the rest of her whiskey, then tossed the ice-filled glass into her mouth and munched on it like it was peanut brittle. "Even so, I wanna get more powerful so that I will be less useless to master."

"I see," Iceheat said simply. "In that case, I'll put in a good word with Master Light regarding your request. But you shouldn't eat the ice or your drinking glass. It's very bad manners."

Mera cackled loudly, partly in gratitude to her friend, and partly to distract from her faux pas.

Extra Story 3: A Day in the Life of Yume Part 1

One morning, Yume sat up in her princess canopy bed, and after quite a big yawn, she heard the bubbly voice of a fairy maid in her ear.

“A very good morning to you, Miss Yume,” the maid said from the young girl’s bedside.

“G’morning...” Yume mumbled before yawning again and rubbing her sleep-heavy eyes.

“Miss Yume, we have drawn your morning bath for you,” the maid told her. “Allow me to escort you there.”

“Kay...”

Still half-asleep, Yume took the fairy maid’s extended hand and languidly climbed out of bed, brushing her dark bob-length hair out of her face as she did so. The maid led Yume to her private washroom, where the tub was filled with hot water that had multicolored blossoms floating across its surface.



A team of fairy maids proceeded to remove Yume's silk pajamas, followed by her underwear. Yume would have much preferred to disrobe herself and not have to rely on others to perform this particular task for her, but as a former apprentice maid to Princess Lilith, Yume had regularly helped the princess bathe and change clothes, and because of that experience, Yume couldn't bring herself to insist on undressing herself as it would mean refusing the services of the dutiful fairy maids. Yume allowed the fairy maids to rinse her body before she climbed into the tub. As Yume sat there in the warm water, the fairy maids went to work on her hair. First, they used a pleasant-smelling liquid soap to wash it, then rinsed that out and applied another soap-like substance to her locks, before rinsing that out too. Even though Yume's hair only fell just short of her shoulders, the fairy maids invested a near-unjustifiable amount of attention to her hair care.

Yume stood up in the tub so the maids could wash and scrub the rest of her body. Even though Yume was still only ten, she didn't see herself as a little kid anymore, and she was old enough to feel vaguely embarrassed about getting this kind of treatment. Yet once again, Yume held her tongue and dealt with it, allowing the maids to carry on performing their duties, because she knew they would feel unneeded and despondent if she put a stop to it.

Once she was out of the bath, Yume allowed herself to be dressed in the outfit the fairy maids had prepared for her, complete with the signature ribbon she always wore on one side of her hair. By this point, Yume had built up a huge collection of ribbons in a variety of colors, materials, and designs that would match whatever mood she was in, as well as the outfit she wore that day. Once she was dressed, Yume sat down at a table in her private chambers and waited for breakfast to be served. Much to her displeasure, she often ate breakfast alone. Well, if you didn't count the maids attending to her, that was.

"Where's my brother?" Yume pouted. "Isn't he ever gonna come eat with me?"

"I'm afraid Master Light is presently occupied with activities up on the surface world, Miss Yume," said a fairy maid with an apologetic expression. "I believe he might unfortunately be too busy to dine with you today..."

Because Light was so focused on getting revenge on all of his enemies, he would often venture outside of the Abyss to do some questing, gather intelligence, or meet with Lilith and other dignitaries. Whenever Light was in the Abyss, however, he was usually swamped with reviewing documents and reports, as well as other administrative

tasks along those lines. Naturally, Light didn't want to have to tell his little sister directly that he was too busy taking revenge on his sworn enemies to see her more often, so he had always kept his reasons for his continued absence rather vague, but luckily for the young dungeon master, Yume readily accepted that overseeing an operation as large as the Abyss must take a lot of work (she was as a trainee maid in the Human Kingdom palace, after all), so she decided it was best not to pry.

I shouldn't bother him since he's so busy with his work, Yume told herself as food was placed on the table in front of her. Needless to say, the spread was far more delectable than what Yume used to eat in her former life on her family's peasant farm, and the food even surpassed the dishes served up in the Human Kingdom palace.

"Thank you for the meal," Yume said before digging in. Although the food was absolutely divine, she didn't enjoy eating it by herself.

After breakfast, Yume changed into the dress she wore for her private lessons and sat down at a desk in front of her instructor. Much like any normal preteen, Yume found this kind of structured book learning stuffy and boring.

"I already know how to add and subtract, and I know how to read lots of words," Yume said through pursed lips. Back in the Human Kingdom, the head maid and a few others had instructed Yume on these basic skills, though it had been less a charitable act than a necessary part of her training to become a passable servant for the royal family. In a sense, Yume had good cause to be frustrated, since she was far more educated than most human children her age, but the fairy maid serving as Yume's instructor wasn't going to acquiesce to her protests that easily.

"You are Master Light's precious little sister, so we cannot allow ourselves to be satisfied with that level of knowledge," the maid sniffed, shaking her head. "You must learn advanced arithmetic, magic, and proper etiquette, as well as the art of conducting yourself in the manner of a ruler."

A feeble but anguished groan escaped Yume's lips, but it did nothing to convince the maid to stop tutoring her, so the girl spent the entire morning working through her lessons. Her lunch break came and went—without Light joining her, as per usual—then she spent the afternoon largely engaged in physical activities to keep fit and healthy. Yume found this time of the day much easier and way more fun than her morning studies. Then after all of her physical exertion, she took another bath and prepared for dinner. The evening hours between suppertime and bedtime were Yume's own to fill however she pleased, and this was when Nazuna usually came to visit as her bodyguard-slash-playmate. Yume kept to this schedule most days, and

compared with her time as an apprentice maid, her new lifestyle offered much more in the way of comfort and security.

Yume desired more, however.



“Mrrr...”

The first thing I saw on opening the door to Yume’s room was her sulking with her cheeks puffed out.

“Sorry, Yume,” I said. “We haven’t seen each other in a while, have we?”

“Mrrr!” Yume rushed over to me, glomped me, and refused to let go.

I had only recently been reunited with my baby sister after three long years apart, and during that time, I’d had no idea if she was dead or alive. I’d brought her down to the Abyss—the safest and most hospitable place in the world, as far as I was concerned—but I’d been too busy lately getting revenge on my sworn enemies and dealing with other related business, which meant I hadn’t gotten a chance to come and see Yume for a pretty long time, and as such, she was now acting clingy and peevish with me.

With Yume’s arms still wrapped tightly around me, I shuffled over to one of the sofas in Yume’s chambers and eased myself onto it so that I could comfort her while she sat on my lap. When she was feeling a little more like herself, she started blurting out all the complaints that had built up inside her mind over the past few weeks.

“At first, I sort of liked getting waited on hand and foot by all the maids, because it made me feel like I was Princess Lilith,” Yume began. “But they never let me do *anything* by myself, and I’m getting tired of it. I don’t like my morning lessons either. They’re so boring. I just wanna go play with Auntie Nazuna instead. And I wanna spend more time with you, brother!”

I definitely knew where she was coming from with these complaints. I’d also enjoyed the royal treatment at first, but as time wore on, I got tired of all those eyes watching me. I even found the whole pampering business kind of stressful until I eventually got used to it. I didn’t like the extra book learning I was basically forced to do, and I absolutely sympathized with her about wanting to just play and have fun all day. Heck, if I could have, I’d have sat here and hung out with Yume day in and day out, but unfortunately, life wasn’t all fun and games.

“I know how you feel, Yume,” I said. “But you need to keep learning all that stuff for your own good. Whenever you have free time after your lessons, you can play with Nazuna, as long as she’s not busy. If you’re tired of the fairy maids doing practically *everything* for

you, you can discuss with them in what situations it would be appropriate for them to give you some space. And I *do* want to spend time with you, believe me. But I...”

I was this close to blurting out everything—my vendetta against the Concord of the Tribes, my search for the truth behind the destruction of our village, my search for our missing brother, plus everything else the world had been keeping secret from me—but I didn’t want Yume to know about any of that, so I paused and forced a grin onto my face.

“I *do* want to spend time with you,” I repeated. “But there are things I have to do first. Once I’m done with them, we can spend as much time together as you want. So just bear with it for a while.”

Yume’s resolve wavered for a moment. “Well, if you *promise* that’s what will happen, then I’ll wait. I’ll keep learning stuff like you said, and I’ll talk to the maids.”

“Thank you, Yume,” I said, patting my sister on her back a few times, her arms still tightly coiled around me. Even though Yume was prone to the odd sulk now and then, she would always go back to being the adorable little worker bee I knew and loved. Honestly, I didn’t deserve a sister like her, and I couldn’t help wanting to spoil her, just this once.

“I know this isn’t much of an apology, but is there anything you’d like? Or anything you want to eat maybe?” I asked. “I’ll give you anything you want. Just name it.”

Yume’s face was still buried in my chest. “You mean it?”

“Yeah, I do,” I replied, before adding a necessary caveat. “At least, I’ll give it to you if it’s *possible* for me to get it for you.”

Yume slowly lifted her gaze until it met mine, her hazel eyes twinkling like gemstones. “I wanna grow flowers. And can I start cooking food too?”

“Flowers and cooking?” I hadn’t expected those words to come out of her mouth.

“Back at the palace, the head maid taught me how to grow flowers in flowerpots, and I was also learning how to cook,” Yume said, puffing her chest out with pride. “I had a lot of fun doing both of those things, and I wanna continue doing them here. Can I?”

“Well...” Growing flowers as a hobby was all well and good, but Yume didn’t really need to learn how to cook. After all, we got all of our food either ready-made from gacha cards, or by the cooks summoned by my Gift preparing dishes for us. Fairy maids were also capable of making simple meals if you asked them to do so, so there really was no practical reason for Yume to learn how to cook. But I had promised her I would give her anything she wanted, so I could hardly go back on that now. And besides, if Yume was saying she

wanted to learn certain skills, what kind of person would I be if I told her no?

“Sure, you got it,” I said finally. “I’ll set aside a special place for you to grow some flowers, and I’ll send a few people your way to teach you how to cook.”

“Thank you, brother!” Yume squealed happily, squeezing me even tighter—if that were possible—and beaming from ear to ear. Sure, I may have been spoiling my sister by doing this, but seeing her smile with joy made it all worthwhile. Moreover, talking with Yume for the first time in a long while had given me a chance to unwind from my grim ongoing campaign for revenge.

Now that she had cheered up immensely, Yume shuffled off my lap and dropped onto the sofa cushion beside me. We spent the rest of the time talking about what kinds of flowers she wanted to grow and the types of food she wanted to learn how to make.

“I’m gonna make some food just for you and feed it to you, brother,” Yume declared.

Extra Story 4: A Day in the Life of Yume Part 2

“Salutations, Miss Yume. I am the SUR Level 9999, Forbidden Witch, Ellie, and I will proudly be serving as your instructor today,” Ellie said, introducing herself to Yume, who was sitting in front of her in a chair. The pair had set themselves up in a room in the bottom tier of the Abyss.

“I love and respect Blessed Lord Light with the entirety of my being, so my fealty naturally extends to you, His Blessedness’s only sister,” Ellie continued. “However, I will endeavor to be a strict instructor on magic, as this is to develop your skills as a mage, and to make sure you can resist magical attacks! Blessed Lord Light has personally asked me to instruct you, so I won’t go easy on you, even if it means you grow to despise me, Miss Yume.”

Even though Ellie was going all gung ho on her magic tutoring, she had yet to find out if Yume actually possessed the necessary ability to become a mage. Yume had already learned the basics of magic from her private lessons with the fairy maids, and Ellie’s plan was to first gauge Yume’s potential as a mage before helping her to develop the skills she would need. But even if Yume ended up possessing no magical abilities whatsoever, Light had asked Ellie to give his sister some advanced lessons on how to respond if she ever found herself involved in a magic battle. Of course, the possibility of that happening was slim to none while Yume remained at the bottom of the Abyss, where she was guarded by Nazuna and a host of other warriors, but Light felt it was better for Yume to have the know-how just in case something unthinkable did occur.

So with that in mind, Light had asked Ellie to find out if Yume had any latent magical abilities, and if she did, to train her up into a mage. Ellie, in turn, could hardly contain her excitement at receiving this assignment to become a personal instructor to Light’s dear sister. Though to clarify, Light had asked Ellie in passing to teach his sister to be a mage; it wasn’t exactly some life-or-death request he had made. But Ellie treated all requests from Light—big or small—as very huge deals indeed, meaning the superwitch would make every effort to fulfill Light’s request to turn Yume into a full-fledged mage, even if she caused the young girl to hate her guts in the process. These concerns ended up being unfounded, however, because Yume was

very excited about the prospect of taking magic lessons.

“Thank you very much, Mistress Ellie!” Yume said. “I can’t wait to learn how to be a mage!”

Yume didn’t like her morning tutoring sessions due to the huge intellectual workload, but all humans dreamed of becoming a mage. The positive reaction from Yume pleased Ellie to her core, and the superwitch almost broke out in a broad grin.

Ellie cleared her throat to recompose herself. “Now, let’s begin teaching you about magic. First, we have...”



A few days after Yume had started her magic training, I went down to the Abyss’s mock battlegrounds to see the fruits of Ellie’s coaching.

“Miss Yume has a natural talent for magic, Blessed Lord,” Ellie said when she caught sight of me.

“What? She does?” I said, taken aback by this news.

Yume giggled cheerfully. “It’s only because Mistress Ellie is such a great teacher.”

“On the contrary,” Ellie replied. “What you are able to do now is entirely down to your own gifts!”

It was clear from her tone that Ellie wasn’t simply heaping undue praise on Yume just because I was present. It really did seem that the Forbidden Witch herself believed my sister had a real talent for magic. Aside from my Unlimited Gacha, I had absolutely no magical abilities whatsoever, so I wasn’t sure whether I should feel jealous of Yume or jump for joy at how amazing she was. I was curious to know how much of a mage Yume was, so I put the question to Ellie.

“I never thought I’d see you talking up Yume like this, Ellie,” I said. “That must mean she has some serious talent. So what kind of magic are we talking here?”

“Allow me to explain,” Ellie said. “Your dear sister possesses a natural talent for illusion spells, so I have focused my training on this category of magic.”

It was commonly thought that a mage who excelled in one type of magic was more successful than a jack-of-all-trades. And from what I was hearing, it sounded as if Yume would grow up to be a talented illusion mage. *So my little sister has the right stuff to be a mage, huh?* I thought. *It’s almost like we’re Elio and Miya.*

Elio and Miya had been part of a fledgling adventurer party made up of teenagers that we’d met the first time I went questing up on the surface world under the alias “Dark.” Gold had instructed Elio and his partymates on how to use their weapons correctly, and I’d given Miya an SSR Wish Bracelet that had ended up saving her. I sure hoped the

two of them were living a nice, peaceful life back in their village...

"Brother, is something wrong?" Yume asked, noticing my distant look.

"Uh, nope, I'm fine," I said. "Anyway, what kind of magic can you do, Yume?"

"Lemme show you!" she replied. "This'll blow your mind!"

Yume stood in the middle of the dungeon's training grounds and closed her eyes. We had agreed to meet up at this location since it was a big, wide-open space that was perfect for testing out magic.

"Magic power, hear my voice! Manifest these thoughts of choice! Mirage Illusion!" As soon as Yume had finished her incantation, a butterfly made purely of light floated up out of her open palms. Even though it looked a bit hazy and unstable, I could clearly make out what it was, and I watched as it moved slowly through the air above the training grounds. I was honestly surprised.

"How are you able to make such an easily recognizable shape after only a few days of training?" I marveled. "You really *are* talented, Yume. That was incredible!"

I'd heard that it took people months, sometimes even years, to adequately harness their powers, even if they had large enough mana pools. Yet Yume was able to perform a real magic spell within the space of just a few days. It was no wonder that Ellie thought my sister was so gifted.

Yume hummed with pride, her tiny nostrils flaring as she held her nose high in the air. "That's not the only magic I can do, brother. I can even put my powers to good use! Watch this!"

Yume closed her eyes again and recited a different chant. "Magic power, hear my plea! Manifest thy form on me! Mirage Illusion!"

All of a sudden, cat ears grew out of the top of Yume's head. Or at least, that was what it looked like.

"Meoow!" Yume yowled. "What do you think, brother? Do I look like Aoyuki or what?"

"Yeah, I can see the resemblance," I remarked. "Who'd have thought you'd be able to control your magic enough to create a pair of cat ears on top of your head? They look very cute, by the way."

I tried to stroke the cat ears, but since they were just illusions, my hand simply phased through them like they weren't there. But whether the cat ears were real or not, it didn't change the fact that Yume looked totally adorable in them. Hearing me say her cat ears were cute had made Yume blush, but she was still smiling away.

"I can also put cat ears on other people!" Yume declared. "Even you, brother!"

"Huh? Y-You don't have to do that," I said. "They wouldn't look good on me, anyway."

“No, you’ll *definitely* look cute!” Yume declared, and out of the corner of my eye, I could see Ellie nodding vigorously at this remark. And it wasn’t just her: my escort to the training grounds, Iceheat, and Yume’s attendant fairy maids were all showing their agreement in the same way.

“Magic power, hear my whims! Manifest thy form on him! Mirage Illusion!” As soon as Yume finished the incantation, she glanced at me again and her eyes twinkled with excitement.

“Golly, brother! You *do* look cute in cat ears!” Yume remarked. “I *knew* I was right!”

“Uh, are you sure I look ‘cute’? Like, as a guy, I mean,” I said.

If I did have cat ears growing out of my head, I couldn’t feel them at all, but based on what Yume was saying, they were indeed there. Honestly, being called “cute” just rubbed me the wrong way. I would rather have been called “rugged” or “manly” if I could have had my way. Yume paid no attention to my obvious disgruntlement and continued to compliment me on my new cat ears.

“Don’t worry, brother. You look *terrifically* cute, meow!” Yume said. “Come on, it’s your turn now! Meow!”

“What? Do I really have to?” I protested.

“Meooow!” Yume was egging me on in a way that reminded me of Aoyuki. Or rather, Yume *wanted* us to talk like Aoyuki, now that an opportunity to do so had presented itself. But I couldn’t say no to my baby sister, so I smiled through gritted teeth and did as I was told.

“M-Meow...” I said quietly.

“Meeyow!” Yume purred.

To place this situation into its proper context, we were two kids—siblings, I might add—who were presently mewling at each other in Aoyuki’s catspeak with illusory cat ears on our heads. Apparently, this sight was so precious, Ellie and everyone else in attendance felt the need to either press their hands over their mouths or to cover their noses.

“Miss Yume really is naturally talented!” Ellie enthused. “There’s no mistaking how gifted she is!”

“I agree, Miss Ellie,” Iceheat piped up. “Milady is a rare talent indeed!”

The fairy maids proceeded to rain down praise on Yume too, though I got the feeling none of them were actually referring to Yume’s talent as a mage. Or maybe it was just me? I tilted my head to one side in wonderment, totally forgetting that I still had cat ears on my head, and this one small movement was enough to make an exhilarated Ellie and the rest of the euphoric onlookers fall to their knees.

Seeing everybody looking so thrilled beyond words, Yume

expressed her delight in the only way that made any sense to her in that moment: “Meeoow!”



The people who had witnessed the sight of Light magically growing cat ears naturally ended up spreading the word to everyone else, and the news caused a bit of a stir in certain corners of the Abyss. But that was a story for another time.

Extra Story 5: A Day in the Life of Yume Part 3

I looked over the invitation that gave off the impression that it was *meant* to be written in a polite, genteel manner, but the letters were a little too round and curvy for that, as if it had been handwritten by a kid. Which was only to be expected, as the invitation had been signed by my little sister, Yume, and my loyal deputy, Nazuna.

A little while back, I had promised Yume that I would give her anything she wanted to make up for the fact that I'd been too busy to spend any time with her. I knew that it didn't really amount to an apology, but at the time, I'd felt that I had to do *something* for her, since she was feeling quite lonely without my presence in this unfamiliar environment. Yume had told me she wanted to do two things: grow flowers and learn how to cook. In response to her request, I'd gotten some of my people to set up a section of the dungeon where she could plant flowers, then gave her some seeds that she could cultivate. I also made sure a place was set aside where Yume could practice cooking in private, with all the ingredients she would need close at hand, before assigning a fairy maid to serve as her cookery teacher.

These gifts had cheered Yume up to no end, and she was having a blast taking care of her flowers and cooking meals. And now I was being personally invited on a tour of her garden, followed by a tea party so that I could see—and taste—the results of all of her hard work. Though, there was just one thing that was giving me pause. It would also mean having to eat treats that Nazuna had made from scratch. *I don't mind eating Yume's food, but can Nazuna even cook?*

Yume was pretty capable for her age. When Princess Lilith rescued her and took her on as an apprentice maid, Yume quickly learned on the job and performed her duties around the palace without any trouble. As for Nazuna, while she might have been considered unbeatable on the battlefield, I honestly had no idea what to expect when it came to her cooking. I knew Yume and Nazuna were so close, they were practically on the same wavelength, but I never imagined Yume would actually inspire Nazuna to start cooking too.

Well, a fairy maid should be teaching Nazuna, so hopefully that means she won't serve me something completely inedible, I reasoned. And if it

did come to that, I could always rely on my Level 9999 resistance stats to tough out any meal. When the appointed time drew near, I swallowed down all of my qualms and made my way to the venue written on the invitation: “Yume’s Botanical Garden.”



“I’m so glad you made it, brother!” Yume said cheerfully.

“Thanks a lot for comin’, master!” Nazuna piped up with a similar amount of gusto.

“No, thank *you* for inviting me,” I replied with a warm smile. “I can’t wait to see what you’ve got in your botanical garden, not to mention what treats you’ve made.”

At first blush, the name “Yume’s Botanical Garden” might have sounded somewhat overblown for what was essentially supposed to be a simple flower garden that Yume had started as a hobby, but it turned out her project was large enough for the name to actually be appropriate. All we had done to help Yume prepare the flower garden was to bring soil down from the surface and give her some seeds, but she had continued to add more and more flowerbeds until there were enough to realistically call this area a botanical garden.

Yume took my hand and showed me all of the flowers she had been cultivating. I wasn’t able to identify most of the species by name, but they came in a whole range of shades and colors, and all of them were in full bloom. The blossoms included a number that could be found up on the surface world, plus some exotic flowers that had been grown from seeds and seedlings produced by my Unlimited Gacha.

“This is my favoritest flower of all!” Yume declared as the tour came to an end. “It’s called the butterfly orchid!”

“Oh, I know this one,” I said. “This flower came from my Unlimited Gacha, didn’t it?” This particular variety had rather showy petals that were a mix of white, red, and a couple of other colors. The flower was so gorgeous, it had stuck in my memory.

“That’s right,” Yume replied cheerfully. “It’s a flower you summoned with your Gift, and I like it because it’s really pretty.”

“I’m really flattered to hear that,” I said. Yume had been really sulky before because I’d been too busy to make time for her, so I was glad to see her in good spirits again.

“Master! I also planted some flowers I found up on the surface!” Nazuna told me. “Come and take a gander!”

Nazuna took me by the hand that wasn’t being held by Yume and led me to what turned out to be an absolutely humongous plant. It was a good two meters tall, and while it had a stem, leaves, petals, and a number of other identifying features that signified it was a flower, it looked an awful lot like some kind of plant monster. The

petals themselves were arranged like a gaping mouth that was ready to gobble a puppy or kitten whole.



Nazuna burst out laughing. "You're such a kidder, master! Anyone can see it's a flower! And I'd never bring a monster down here that might harm little sister."

"You're so thoughtful, Auntie Nazuna!" Yume piped up on cue.

Nazuna puffed out her large, armored chest. "Well, I *am* your auntie, y'know! I'm always thinkin' about your safety, little sister!"

Well, as far as I can tell, it seems like it's just a normal plant, even if it is supersized, I thought. And I guess even if it does turn out to be a monster, Yume should be fine as long as she sticks with Nazuna. In any case, I never knew a flower this big even existed up on the surface world. I've picked up a few things about plants thanks to my lessons in apothecarial sciences and alchemy, but I guess botany might be an interesting field to read up on too...

Nazuna showed me the other plants she had retrieved from the surface world, and it turned out that Nazuna's collection was mostly made up of weird and often downright bizarre vegetation, while Yume had focused on growing regular flowers that she thought looked pretty. Because of Nazuna's wide array of odd specimens, this place should really have been named "Nazuna's Botanical Garden," but it appeared she didn't really care about the garden's name because she was just having fun participating in Yume's hobby with her. I guessed those two must have gotten really close.

After we had finished touring the flower garden, the two girls led me to what they deemed to be the main event: the tea party. There was an open area in the middle of the garden where a few fairy maids had just finished setting a table for us. The tea was made from herbal leaves Yume had planted herself, and of course, the treats were cookies that had been made by both Nazuna and Yume. I started sampling the cookies one after another.

"Mm, these taste great," I said. "Did you cook these round ones, Yume?"

"Yeah, I worked hard on them to make sure you'd like them," Yume said. "And these cookies here are the ones Auntie Nazuna made. What do you think of them?"

"Mm, they're a bit on the thin side, but I like the taste and the smell of them," I said. "Plus, this herbal tea goes well with these snacks. Thank you so much for doing all of this, Yume and Nazuna."

Nazuna groaned under her breath. "Some of my cookies sorta got burned, but I promise I'll cook 'em even better next time! I'll do whatever it takes for you and little sister to say I make the bestest cookies!"

"That's the spirit, Auntie Nazuna!" Yume said, encouraging her friend. "We'll practice even more together!"

The three of us spent the rest of the tea party chatting away and having a grand old time, and I thought the herbal tea and all of the cookies were delicious. *Thank goodness I didn't have to rely on my endurance stats*, I thought to myself, though I made sure not to say it out loud. But I had to admit, Yume and Nazuna were getting along like a house on fire. They really did seem to be on exactly the same wavelength.

“Don't they taste great, brother?” Yume asked. “We should throw another tea party soon!”

“Yeah, you're right,” I said, savoring this brief moment of respite from my busy schedule. “We should really do this more often.”

Extra Story 6: The Slavers Get Punished

The slave traffickers' hideout was a cave deep in the forest that straddled the border between the Dwarf Kingdom and the Human Kingdom, and it was inside this cave that the gang imprisoned their captives, which ranged from folk abducted from poor farming villages to traveling merchants who were unable to defend themselves. The criminal gang was entirely made up of humans, which meant they were targeting members of their own race, and their captives fetched large sums of money on the black market. Two men in their late twenties were standing guard in front of the cave, protecting the precious "wares" inside.

"The guys workin' in the towns must be livin' it up, I tells ya," one of the guards grumbled. "They can buy all the good beer, food, and women they want with the kinda money that's comin' in. But when you're stuck out in these godforsaken woods, havin' all the money in the world don't count for nothin'."

"No kiddin'," the second sentry agreed. "At least we can get by with the liquor and food we gots in the cave, but ya can forget about gettin' it on with some high-class broad way out here."

The two guards were armed with nothing more than short spears since they didn't have to worry about any monsters approaching, so as they basically had nothing to do, they mostly ended up killing time by airing their grievances. At present, there were about twenty members of the criminal gang and ten slaves, adding up to a total of thirty humans in the cave, give or take, though this wasn't the extent of the gang. A few members had been dispatched to nearby towns to act as slave merchants to broker deals, while others were out handling various tasks such as resupplying and relaying messages from clients. The size of the criminal gang made it seem like a small-time operation at first glance, but they were actually rolling in money after the Wicked Witch of the Tower banned human slavery in the neighboring Elven Queendom, amplifying demand for black-market slaves. It was also widely believed that the tower witch would seek to expand her influence outside of the Elven Queendom and the Dark Elf Islands, and all of this meant the illicit slave traders were doing the best business since establishing their crew. But as most of the gang were forced to hide out in a cave deep in this forest due to the nature of their

business, spending the bundles of money they were earning proved difficult, and this was the root cause of the guards' present griping.

"It's crazy. We can get all the booze and food we need out to these woods, no problem. But no woman's gonna hike all the way out here," the first guard bemoaned. "And on top of that, we can't touch none of the female slaves, 'cause they'll lose value. Plus, the designated sex wench is such a total corpse in bed now, I'm growing sick of her. Think this one's gonna kick the bucket pretty soon, just like the last one did."

"Yeah, but that bitch croaked 'cause ya were too rough with her," his fellow guard berated him. "She weren't much to look at, but those massive melons were to die for. But you just *had* to go and make an example of her, didn't ya?"

The first guard guffawed. "Yeah, sorry. That one's on me. Ya *know* I can't get my rocks off unless I'm knockin' the girl about some. It's like my fists got minds of their own or somethin'."

Occasionally, the gang had to deal with a slave no one wanted to purchase. If that slave was male, they tortured and killed him in front of the others as a warning not to attempt to escape, and if the slave was female, they gang-raped her to send a message to any of the other female slaves who were thinking of running away. These displays were often so horrific and brutal, even the most strong-willed of captives were intimidated into submission.

"Well, anyway, we'll just drink ourselves stupid once we're done with guard duty," the second guard muttered. "The classy dames'll have to wait till the next time we hit town."

"Beer, wenches, gambling. In that order," the first guard said. "I hope they hurry it up with switchin' us to town duty."

The slavers periodically rotated duties between the hideout and the towns to keep morale up, and the two guards sniggered lecherously at the kind of debauchery they would engage in once they were out of these woods. With nothing else to occupy them, this was pretty much the extent of what the guards could get up to, but this perfectly monotonous day was about to take a much darker turn.

"Keh heh heh heh!" A raspy cackle ripped through the forest, taking the two guards by surprise. "You boys look like you're having fun. Let us join in!"

The voice definitely didn't belong to any of their comrades in the cave or any associates who might have been returning from one of the nearby towns. The next thing the guards knew, a tall and rather beautiful woman was standing in front of them, surrounded by a number of cute girls in maid outfits.

When the hell did these chicks get here? thought the first guard.
Did we miss 'em approachin' while shootin' the bull? the second

guard speculated. *But that's literally impossible! Even if we were chattin' away, we'd notice a toddler crawlin' up! So how'd these girls escape our notice?*

The guards pointed their spears at Mera's party, though they were at a total loss to explain how these strangers had just suddenly appeared in this part of the woods. For starters, their hideout was located deep in the wild forest that separated the Dwarf Kingdom and the Human Kingdom, and while it might have been true that this particular section of the woods only contained low-level monsters, there were still enough of them to cause a lot of hassle for anyone attempting to make it through the forest. Of course, the criminal gang had made doubly sure that the area around their cave was entirely free of monsters by sprinkling the immediate vicinity with dung from high-level monsters that they'd obtained via a certain connection they had, and the smell from this dung warded off any lower-level monsters that might be otherwise minded to wander this way.

For these reasons, hardly anyone or anything showed up at the hideout, with the only exceptions being members of the criminal gang and folk who were unfortunate enough to lose their way. But these beautiful young women didn't appear to have a speck of dust or grime on them, so that ruled out the possibility that they were simply lost in the woods.

Mera—the tallest of the group—chuckled at the spears being pointed at her. “You must be the piles of coprolite who have been illegally capturing humans to sell as slaves. Well, the ones you don't kill, anyway. I'm afraid you guys have incurred the wrath of our noble master, who was deeply saddened when he heard about the cruelty your victims have had to endure because of you. Our task is to free the humans you've captured and make you feel the same pain, fear, and misery you put your captives through, if not more. And after we've made you suffer, we'll end your lives.”

The first guard laughed. “Well, go tell your ‘master’ that he's a giant chickenshit if he's sendin' girls to do his work for 'im!”

“Ooh, look at me! I'm pissin' my pants over 'ere!” the second guard mocked, sniggering. “Anyway, we're just gonna grab you bimbos so we can find out who yer stupid master is and how the hell ya sniffed out our stronghold!” The guard turned around to shout into the cave. “Intruders! We need backup!”

It appeared the guards believed they had come across fresh meat for their operation—and gorgeous meat at that. Of course, what they didn't know was they were dealing with Light's summons, whose power levels went far beyond anything they could imagine, and worst of all, they had just dissed their beloved dungeon lord. The fairy maids scowled at the guards, but Mera was nonplussed. After all,

whether the slavers were respectful or not wasn't going to change the outcome at all.

Mera raised both of her wide sleeves and unleashed a torrent of centipedes that instantly overwhelmed one of the guards. This was neither a gimmick nor an illusion; hundreds of live, dark centipedes really did fly out of Mera's sleeves and cover every inch of the shrieking guard.

"No! Get off me! Gaaah!" the guard screeched as he tried to bat away the centipedes with his spear, but there were too many to swing at, and most of them landed on him unharmed. The bugs squirmed their way into his body through his mouth, nostrils, and other orifices, and once inside, they started to devour his organs. The centipedes multiplied inside the guard's body as they loudly feasted on his innards, causing his belly to distend like a balloon until it burst and disgorged the bugs everywhere. Normally, this kind of gruesome fate would be enough to kill a human on the spot, but the guard could only wish he were so lucky.

"Help..." he groaned, reaching a hand out toward his partner. "Please help me..."

Centipedes continued to crawl out of his eye sockets, his ears, his mouth, and the gaping hole that used to be his abdomen. The other guard screamed at this scene that seemed like something out of an unimaginable nightmare, before tossing his spear to the ground and scuttling into the cave, his horrified shrieks echoing off the walls.

Cackling at the spectacle, Mera manipulated the now-zombified, centipede-coated guard to walk into the cavern as she followed on behind. "Looks like it's time to get this party started, babes."



"Willya pull yerself together and tell me what the hell's goin' on?!" the leader of the criminal gang yelled in exasperation. He couldn't make heads or tails of the surviving guard's report.

"I-I just told you!" the guard said frantically. "A buncha women showed up outta nowhere, a-and one of 'em raised her arms and shot out these black centipedes that just—hruuuck!" The guard's report was interrupted by him regurgitating his lunch as he recalled what had happened to his partner.

The leader clicked his tongue. "Ya had too much booze or drugs while ya were s'posed to be on watch? What yer sayin' doesn't make a lick of sense!"

"What do we do, boss?" one of the slavers piped up.

"Well, it's obvious that *someone's* shown up," the leader reasoned. "Maybe it's a bunch of adventurers? Whoever they are, we take 'em out, leavin' one or two alive so we can pump 'em for answers, then slit

their throats too. And when we're done, we'll go find a new hideout since this one's been compromised."

"Sure thing, boss!" the gang member replied.

The boss glanced down dismissively at the guard, who was on his hands and knees puking up his guts. Not appreciating the imminent danger he and his lackeys were in, the leader of the slavers had come to the conclusion that the guard was under the influence and probably confused because something had caught him by surprise, which could've been the fact that it was a bunch of women that had shown up for all the leader knew.

"You lugs strung yer bows?" the criminal boss barked. "Then get in position and fire as soon as these interlopers show their faces!"

Almost as soon as the lackeys had taken their places, the sound of dragging feet could be heard echoing down the corridor that led to the entrance. The surviving guard shrieked and scuttled away to the farthest reaches of the cavern.

"That shithead," the boss muttered. "We'll kill that useless lump to set an example to the rest of 'em after we've dealt with these intruders."

"Boss, they're gettin' closer!" one gang member piped up.

"All right, men. Take aim and get ready to loose them arrows!" the leader said to his ten-plus archers.

The cave had enough magic items placed along its walls to light the interior, but not enough for the glow to be seen outside. This was partly for security purposes and partly because magic illumination items were on the expensive side. The archers had positioned themselves in an area several meters in diameter where there was just enough light and visibility for them to see, but the rest of the cave was shrouded in semidarkness, meaning it took a good amount of time before any intruders were discernible in the gloom. At last, the source of the sound of dragging feet entered the circle of light, and the archers were shocked at what they saw. They immediately recognized the intruder as one of their own, but his body was covered from head to toe in centipedes, with yet more crawling out of every hole on his body. And as if that wasn't enough, even more centipedes had formed some kind of living, undulating vortex behind the guard.

"Wh-What the hell kinda monster is *that*?!" one archer blurted out. "Do those things even spawn in this forest?"

"Hey, I can hear him moaning," another archer remarked. "I-Is he still alive?"

"Boss! What now?" asked a third.

"This ain't the time to be askin' questions! Fire, damn it!" the boss yelled at them. "Don't ya dare hesitate just 'cause you know 'im! Kill 'im if ya have to, but don't let those bugs near us!"

The archers quickly loosed their arrows, which all hit the target of their former brother-in-arms. But the only real damage the arrows did was pierce a small number of centipedes, making them wriggle about in pain, and the zombified guard kept shuffling toward the criminal gang with arrow shafts skewering his head.

Peals of cruel-sounding laughter rang out around the cavern. "Hey now. That's no way to treat an old pal. You might not be able to tell by looking at him, but he's already going through a whole world of pain right now. And here you are, firing arrows at him to add to it."

Mera emerged from the vortex of centipedes behind the doomed guard, and from her billowing sleeves, several dark tentacles extended and danced around in the air in a playful fashion.

"You... You're a monster..." the boss gasped.

"Well, *that's* not a very nice thing to say," Mera chortled. "But you're not exactly off the mark either. I serve the Wicked Witch of the Tower, and we got word that you dumbos have been illegally capturing humans and selling them into slavery. My orders are to slaughter each and every one of you cretins, but only after I've made you endure more pain and horror than you've inflicted on the slaves!"

"What's that? You work for the Wicked Witch?!" the boss screeched before turning to his men. "Shoot her! Fire every arrow ya got into this tentacled bug lady!"

The archers quickly responded to this order by loosing another round of arrows, but they simply bounced off Mera as if they were made of rubber, while some wayward projectiles hit the zombified guard instead.

Mera chuckled icily. "Stop that. You're tickling me. Did you really think those things would work on me? Even mosquito bites leave more of an impression!" Mera held her sleeves aloft and whipped her tentacles toward the two nearest archers before wrapping them around their ankles. The archers screamed as the tentacles dragged them across the cave floor toward the chimera.

"Heeelp!" yelled one.

"Nooo! Don't!" cried the other.

The two unfortunate men clawed at the ground in a vain attempt to resist the tentacles, but they were just too strong for the men, and they eventually brought the pair close enough to the centipede-covered guard, who promptly pounced on them and used his teeth to rip off chunks of flesh so the bugs would have an easy access point to their innards.

"Graaah!" one of the archers yelled.

"Yow! Ow! Stop biting me!" cried the other.

Just as with the guard, the centipedes devoured the internal organs of their two victims and started multiplying inside their bodies

until the black insects erupted from every orifice, including the newly made ones. Now completely zombified, the two centipede-covered archers got back to their feet and shuffled toward the rest of the gang members.

“That’s it? You’re no longer putting up a fight?” Mera teased, then roared with laughter. “Okay, fine with me. Who else wants to join our little jamboree?”

The surviving gang members all screamed as one, then turned and ran deeper into the cave. The slavers had finally realized they were no match for the intruders and were mere moments away from suffering an unimaginably horrific death.

“What the hell is goin’ on?!” yelled one of the slavers. “Why’d the witch send this woman to attack us? I thought we could do whatever we wanted with humans!”

“Boss, what’ll we do?!” another gang member yelled in desperation. “If we don’t do somethin’, we’re all gonna get massacred by that freak!”

“Men! If ya don’t wanna be eaten alive by them bugs, then bring out the slaves!” the leader thundered. “If this woman’s allied to the tower witch, then the slaves’ll be our human shields! We’ll use ’em to make our escape!”

“Y-Yessir!” the gang members replied as they ran through the cave—which was basically just one long passageway from one end to the other—until they finally reached the entrance to the holding chamber where the slaves were imprisoned. The leader ordered a few blanched-faced men to open the doors, but they were met with an unwanted surprise.

“Boss! There ain’t nobody in ’ere!” one of the men called out. “All the slaves we had are gone!”

“Th-That’s preposterous!” the leader spluttered. “We kept this place locked up tight, and had a guard posted outside! Move, you goons!”

The boss shoved his underlings out of the way so he could take a look inside the holding cell for himself, but just as the gang member had said, there were no slaves anywhere to be seen.

“H-How the hell did the goddamn slaves *escape*?! Just how?” The boss stamped his feet in angry frustration, but no amount of yelling was going to get them out of the predicament he and his crew found themselves in.



Mera snickered wickedly as she watched the criminal gang scampering toward the rear of the cave in an attempt to get as far away from her as possible. “Did you free them all?”

“Yes, we did, Miss Mera,” replied one of the fairy maids who had approached the chimera. “We’ve secured the slaves along with the other detainees those scumbags were using to indulge their sick impulses. The captives have all been teleported to the Great Tower.”

Mera had made a big show of attacking the criminal gang using her tentacles and centipedes to strike fear into the men and cause them to fall into hopeless despair, but the display had also been designed to serve a secondary purpose of distracting the slavers while the fairy maids made their way past them to the back of their hideout in order to find the captives and teleport them away. The fairy maids had managed to slip past the notice of the gang members because each maid was equipped with an SSR Conceal card. Along with all the slaves who were waiting to be sold, the fairy maids had also encountered captives the gang had considered “damaged goods.” These individuals had been subjected to torture, rape, and other forms of maltreatment as a way of scaring all the other slaves into obedience. The fairy maid delivering her report winced as she recalled the designated sex slave they had found, empathizing with her as a fellow woman.

Mera reassured the fairy maid with a chuckle that the gang would be getting their comeuppance soon. “Then I’ll just have to crush those bastards’ souls as well as their bodies, hun. If any slaves are wounded at all, make sure you give them healing cards to restore their physical and mental health. As long as they’re alive, there’s still hope for them.”

Light’s Unlimited Gacha produced cards that could heal injuries and ones that could suppress traumatic memories, though Ellie’s powers would be needed to add the finishing touches to the healing process. Even the former sex slave would be able to fully recover from her horrifying ordeal, given the right treatment.

“Yes, you’re right, Miss Mera,” the fairy maid said. “Thank you so much for reminding me of that.”

“Oh, please. All I did was state the obvious,” Mera said, laughing. “Now, I believe it’s about time I ended this little shindig. You guys can head on back to the tower.”

“Understood, Miss Mera,” the fairy maid replied with a bow before dropping back again to inform the others. Mera chuckled with gleeful wickedness as she resumed her hunt for the slavers, fully intending to crush their souls as well as their bodies.



The remaining slavers had locked themselves into the lounge that doubled as the supply room, which was located at the rear end of the cavern. They had barricaded the entrance with chairs, desks, loaded

wooden crates, and any other large physical object they could find, but they were still unsure whether the makeshift structure would be enough to stop the monster woman from getting in.

“B-Boss, where are ya goin’?” one of the slavers asked. Everyone in the room was armed, but they were all lacking the will to fight, and as soon as they saw their leader leaving for his private room that was connected to the lounge, the men looked like little kids coming to the sudden realization that they were being abandoned by their parents.

The boss turned around to address his men. “I’m grabbin’ my secret weapon, of course. I can’t let you mooks be killed by that freak, can I?”

“Ya got a secret weapon?” said an underling.

“Sure do,” the boss replied. “I lifted it off some merchant I killed a while back. It’s this really powerful magic weapon that can only be used once, but I figure now’s as good a time as any to use it to save our behinds.”

“Yer a lifesaver, boss!” one of his lackeys cheered jubilantly. “I never knew we had a secret weapon like that!”

Now that the slavers had regained a little of their morale, the leader saw his opportunity to motivate them further. “My secret weapon’ll extinguish that murderous freak show, just you watch! This is our only way out of this jam, boys, so I’ll go fish it out! In the meantime, don’t ya dare let that nasty bitch in here, ya hear me?!”

“Yessir!” the slavers yelled as one.

The boss scurried to his private room while his now fully committed lackeys braced the makeshift barricade with their combined weight. *Thanks a bunch, ya gullible dumbasses*, thought the boss. *Ya just keep slowin’ down that bug lady while I blow this joint.*

Once he was in his private room, he went straight for his go bag that he kept ready in case he needed to make a quick getaway for whatever reason, which contained preserved food, a knife, and bars of precious metals he could exchange for cash. Go bag in hand, the boss ran over to a shelf and shoved all the wine bottles, utensils, and other items off it so that it was light enough to move to one side.

“Dammit! Dammit! Dammit! And just when things were goin’ so perfect!” the boss muttered under his breath. “But that stupid witch *had* to go and send that monster woman after us. Did we end up goin’ too far ‘cause of how good business was? Next time, I’ll have to run a quieter operation.”

Moving the shelf aside revealed a hole in the wall that opened out onto a tunnel that led all the way to the outside. The boss grabbed his room’s illumination item to light his way and entered the passageway, but he didn’t get very far.

“What the hell? Why’s this tunnel blocked?” the leader yelled. “I

checked before! This is s'posed to be a clear route to the outside!" The boss held his illumination item up to the obstruction and saw that it was a smooth wall that appeared newly made. "D-Did that bug lady do this?" he mumbled, but his train of thought was interrupted by sustained screaming from the lounge. The gang's leader surmised that Mera had finally gotten to his men.

"Help!" screeched one of his men. "No, stop! I don't wanna die!"

The anguished screams sounded like they were coming from condemned souls being punished in the pits of hell, and seeming like nothing any living person could make. As soon as the boss heard these cries and shrieks, his blood ran cold.

"S-Screw this!" he said. "I ain't endin' up like those bums! I'm usin' my ace in the hole!"

Even though the gang's boss had fed his men a pack of lies about owning a "secret weapon," he did in fact have a magic item that was only to be used as a last resort: the Short-Range Teleportation Cloth. He'd boosted it off an adventurer who wasn't particularly strong to begin with, and was fairly poorly armed. The gang leader assumed that the adventurer must have been a rookie in a party that had stumbled across this magic item in some dungeon or other, and had stolen the cloth from his partymates at some later date with the intention of selling it for a small fortune. Though whatever the real story behind the teleportation cloth, what mattered right now to the boss of the slavers was that he had it in his hands, which gave him a way to escape. The boss visualized a location just outside of the cave, then tore the cloth to activate the item.

"What?" the boss cried incredulously. "Why ain't I teleportin'? Is it a *fake*?!"

"Nope, that thing's the real deal, sweetheart," a sassy voice said from behind him. "Never thought a pathetic ragtag bunch like you guys would actually own a translocation item, though. Gotta thank our lucky stars that we thought of casting a jamming spell over this cave!"

The boss turned around and found the bug lady—otherwise known as Mera—standing right in front of him, greasy tentacles sprouting from her sleeves and waving in a diabolically buoyant manner. He hadn't even heard her approaching because he had been far too distracted and distraught about his series of misfortunes. Behind Mera were all of his men, each one covered in centipedes that were scurrying in and out of every bodily orifice, including any new ones that had been made. The gang leader tried to back away from Mera and her zombified army, but the wall blocking his path impeded him from doing so. Mera chortled deeply at his predicament.

"Not only did we set up an antiteleportation barrier, we also

blocked up this escape tunnel before we showed our faces at the front of your little hideout,” Mera said. “After all, we had to do everything in our power to make sure none of you creeps escaped. You should feel honored that we put in so much time and effort in preparation for squashing you bottom-feeding slugs.”

“P-Please spare me,” the boss begged. “I’ll give you anything you want. I’ll give the tower witch all the wealth and assets we have. Plus, I swear I’ll never illegally enslave another human! And I can be of use to you girls too! I’ll do whatever dirty work you ask of me! So please, spare me!”

Mera unleashed a torrent of guffaws that reverberated around the tunnel they were in, before delivering her final verdict in an unsettlingly chilly voice.

“So you wanna do ‘dirty work’ for us, do you now?” Mera said. “Do you think we’re stupid? There’s nothing a piece of garbage who enslaves his fellow humans can offer us. In case you didn’t know, dirty work is something that’s supposed to *benefit* people by the end. The kind of dirt you and your boys got yourselves involved in has only made the lives of good, peace-loving folk miserable. You’ve provided nothing of value to the world, and not even shown mercy to your own race. Can you recall one single instance when you spared someone’s life after they begged you to?”

As Mera predicted, the gang leader stumbled over his words as he tried to find a response to this searching question, drawing another burst of cackling from the chimera. “Well then. That settles it. It’s time you got your just deserts, honey! This is what you get for angering my divine master!”

The centipede-covered gang members started shuffling toward their boss.

“Stay away from me!” he yelled. “Don’t come near me! That’s an order! Please don’t do this! You can have all the money we got—Arrrrgh!”

The swarm flung itself on top of the leader and chomped at his flesh through his clothing so that the parasitic centipedes could slither inside to feed on his innards. No matter how much the gang leader struggled, he was no match for the twenty-odd zombified men. The magic illumination item he was holding fell from his hand to the ground, where it lay casting silhouettes of the carnage against the wall that was blocking the passageway. It looked as if the gang boss’s final moments were being told in the form of a shadow play, with his screams providing the narration for an audience of one in Mera, who crowed with laughter as the criminal slavers cannibalized each other under a writhing mass of centipedes.

I was sitting at my desk in my office in the Abyss while Mera updated me on the progress of her operation to take down the human trafficking gang.

“So in short, all the gang members have been exterminated and all the human captives have been rescued?” I asked.

Mera chuckled. “Yes, we managed to pull off a smooth relocation of their former slaves, thanks to the help the fairy maids gave me. However, some of the captives suffered unspeakable physical and mental abuse at the hands of those slavers...”

“Oh, I’ve already read a report from one of the fairy maids on the most critical cases,” I said. “They were able to restore them to sound health, both physically and mentally, using the healing cards at our disposal. In terms of our supplies of those cards, the amount we used equated to little more than a rounding error, so they can easily be replaced.”

After the fairy maids had teleported the slaves to the Great Tower, they tended to the most seriously injured and abused among them. The maids had dutifully jotted down what cards had been used, but I felt the numbers they were talking were too minor to even mention.

“We also searched the nearby towns for merchants and handlers who were connected to the slavers,” Mera continued. “We executed all of them except one merchant, who we teleported to the Great Tower for Miss Ellie, as she needed to probe his memory to find out who’s been purchasing these slaves from the gang.”

I scanned the rest of Mera’s written report that I had in my hand, which elaborated a little more on what she had just told me. The text mentioned that Ellie was having great success in identifying the gang’s clients, and as soon as the superwitch had the full list of people who had purchased slaves from them, we would be sending Mera or whoever over there to free their slaves. I knew Mera would knock this task out of the park, but this outcome easily exceeded all of my expectations.

“You’re really awesome, Mera,” I said enthusiastically. “Thank you for going above and beyond. I knew I could count on you to take care of this.”

Mera cackled once more. “I’m truly humbled by your words, but I couldn’t have done it without the help of the fairy maids and Miss Ellie, nor without the assistance you provided me with, master, so this achievement isn’t mine alone. But I will humbly accept your kind words.”

Despite her self-effacement, Mera looked like she was on cloud nine and spoke a little quicker than normal to hide the fact that she

was trembling with joy, though it did appear she was genuinely grateful for everyone's help.

"I'll continue to count on you, Mera," I said.

"Yes, master!" Mera replied, chortling gleefully. "I'll work myself to the bone to make sure you and everyone else remain happy and satisfied!"

I was happy enough just hearing Mera's cheerful response. "I'll need all the help I can get from you, Mera."

Extra Story 7: Suzu and Lock's Day Off

Perched on the edge of her bed, the UR Level 7777, Double Gunner, Suzu hummed softly as she concentrated on her hobby of making dolls of her beloved dungeon master, Light. She easily had more than a hundred dolls in her collection, and they came in a range of sizes: some large, some medium, some small. Since it was Suzu's day off, she had holed herself up in her room right after breakfast and concentrated on sewing her newest creation. But Suzu wasn't completely alone, because her trusty musket and intelligent weapon lay on the bed beside her.

"Hey, partner, do you really find it that much fun making dolls that look like Lord Light?" Lock asked, clicking and wriggling with every word.

The smiling Suzu nodded, her dark, velvety bob swaying slightly as she did so. She looked extremely cute, but she was also extremely shy and taciturn, and the only ones who had ever heard Suzu speak were Lock and—on much fewer occasions—Light. Suzu continued to sew with a fond and perfectly innocent smile lighting up her face. Even though Lock didn't have the capacity to breathe, the musket still managed to heave a sigh.

"Look, partner," Lock started. "It's great you're having fun and all, but you're taking this hobby of yours way too far. Sure, you love and respect Lord Light—I get that—but you don't need to go stitching over a hundred dolls to prove it. If Lord Light walked into this room right now, he'd be well within his rights to freak out. Heck, even *I'm* starting to freak out looking at all this."

Her eyes widening in shock, Suzu instantly stopped sewing as she scanned her room. She had neatly lined up her favorite superdeformed Light dolls in order of size pretty much wherever there was space, while the rest of the dolls were kept in a closet. She would often switch them out and rearrange them as her mood dictated.

"Practically worshipping the ground Lord Light walks on is all well and good," Lock continued. "But any way you look at it, this is simply too much. I think it'd be better if you found yourself a different hobby."

Suzu reacted with excitement almost instantly to this remark by Lock, which caught the musket completely off guard.

“What? You already *have* another hobby?” Lock knew Suzu dabbled in handicrafts—which largely involved making Light dolls—as well as cooking, but the weapon had no idea that his partner had taken up another pastime. Suzu slid open a drawer, took out a notebook, then flipped it open and showed the contents to Lock.

“What’s this?” Lock said before reading aloud, “‘Things I Want To Do With Lord Light?’”

His partner nodded furiously, an increasingly reddish tinge coloring her cheeks. Suzu easily ranked as one of the prettiest maidens in the Abyss—which was remarkable, given the competition—and when she was blushing like this, there was practically no man alive who wouldn’t fall in love with her at first sight. Lock, however, was one of the few males this display had no effect on.

“So you’ve written out a plan for what you’d do on an outing with Lord Light, plus you’ve come up with menus for the meals you’d eat with him,” Lock summarized as he read down the pages. “Oh, and here we have all the topics you’d discuss with Lord Light, and you’d have these conversations in a park at dusk. And here’s the wedding plans, and that’s the name of your first child—Wait, are you *serious*?! This is full-on delusional! You’re starting to scare me!”

Suzu’s eyes widened again in shock, but Lock wasn’t done admonishing the gunner.

“If Lord Light ever finds out about this delusional notebook, he’s going to be seriously weirded out by it! This is weirder than all of these dolls you have! You have no clue how men react to stuff, do you? You even have both sets of equipment down there, so why is such a basic concept so hard for you to grasp?”

Tears of anger rushed to Suzu’s eyes as she grabbed Lock, stood up, and repeatedly banged the barrel of the musket on the edge of the desk.

“Sorry! I’m sorry!” Lock cried out. “I was way out of line! Just please stop bashing me!”

Suzu accepted Lock’s frantic apology by throwing the gun down hard on the bed. She(?) sat back down on the bed herself and turned her head peevishly away from Lock, who let this harsh treatment slide and continued where he left off.

“Look, partner,” Lock began, “I know you’re an incredibly shy person, but I think you should start interacting a bit more with some of the others in this dungeon. You might be needed to take command of an operation at some point down the line, and if you continue to be all shy and awkward with your allies, Lord Light might think twice about entrusting you with that role. You wouldn’t want to put him in that position now, would you?”

Suzu flinched with dread at the thought. There were a handful of

people she met up with on a regular basis who shared her hobbies of doll-making and cooking, but as a Level 7777 warrior, her circle of acquaintances was woefully small. With Lock reminding Suzu of her obligations to Light—the person she revered as her master as well as her crush—she realized that the way she comported herself currently would likely handicap her beloved dungeon lord at some point in the future.

“So I really think you should do something about your extreme bashfulness. For Lord Light’s sake, at least,” Lock summed up.

After thinking about it for a moment, Suzu nodded resignedly. *Hopefully, she can now learn to get along better with the others in the Abyss*, Lock thought, the musket’s sentiments matching the wishes of a parent for a friendless child. However, Lock’s plans for Suzu would end up being thwarted by the last person the musket expected.



“You want to know if you should stop being so shy?” Light said, repeating the question. “Well, quite frankly, I don’t think you should force yourself to change.”

By pure coincidence, Suzu and Lock passed Light in a hallway a few days after her day off, and she took the opportunity to ask her master if her personality posed a potential issue, but Light waved the suggestion away with a gentle smile.

“Everybody in the Abyss knows you’re incredibly shy and that you’re the type to keep yourself to yourself, so when it comes to opening up to others, take all the time you need,” Light said. “I think all of us are patient enough that we can wait for you to change at your own pace.”

Light firmly believed that all of his allies summoned through his Unlimited Gacha would be charitable to each other. After hearing these reassurances from her lord, the gunner blushed with unbridled joy, and such was Suzu’s euphoria, she drew closer to Light and brought her face next to his.

“Thank you so much, Lord Light,” Suzu uttered, and her voice was so soft, only Light and Lock could hear it. Iceheat—who was Light’s escort at present—wrinkled her brow in annoyance, but after hearing Light’s endorsement of Suzu’s personality, she chose to remain silent.

Personally, I think Lord Light should’ve told her to straighten up and fly right, Lock thought to himself, still in Suzu’s grasp. The musket sighed as he looked up at Suzu’s bashfully smitten face. *Well, as long as she’s happy, then I guess I’m happy for her.*

Lock sighed again, but internally this time.

Afterword

I endeavored to write a whole lot of content for this volume, and as such, ended up with limited space for the afterword, so I'll get right down to the acknowledgments.

First, I would like to thank tef for drawing the wonderful illustrations for this fifth volume of the novel! Next, I would like to express my sincere thanks to my managing editor and HJ Novels' editorial team for their assistance in various matters. And of course, I must thank Takashi Ohmae (the artist) and everyone on the Kodansha editorial team for bringing *Unlimited Gacha* to life as a manga series! I can't thank you enough for publishing this most engaging manga that I've been reading week after week!

Above all else, I wish to express gratitude to all of you, my readers! Because of your support, I was able to release this fifth volume, so thank you very much for reading this series! I shall put every effort into my writing, and I will feel truly blessed if I continue to receive your support right through to the very end. I hope to see you all again in the next volume!

PS: Just like in the previous volumes, I have written a bonus story that is available to everyone who purchased this novel. To access the bonus story, go to my activity updates on the *Shosetsuka ni Naro* website, and look for the relevant entry sometime during September 2022.

The password for this volume is: **cover**. [Please note: As of this English-language publication, this password has expired]

Bonus Short Story

Always Drink Responsibly

“Well, color me hornswoggled!” Dagan exclaimed. “I’ve never had a meal this heavenly in all my born days, and I’m the heckin’ king!”

I had joined Dagan and his two associates in the cottage produced by my Unlimited Gacha card, and we had just finished dinner. Mei took away our plates and I regarded the dwarves sitting across the table from me. We were presently in the middle of exploring the set of vast, ancient ruins that lay beneath the Dwarf Kingdom, and the cottage would serve as temporary shelter for the night, as I figured the dwarves could use some rest after facing Stone Golems on the first underground level and crossing what turned out to be a rather deadly sea on the present tier.

We had found an island that housed the shaft leading down to the third underground level, but we’d decided to make camp before pressing onward. Because I always kept a few SR Cottage cards handy, there was no need for us to pitch tents and sleep outdoors, and I kept a decent range of food in my Item Box, meaning we weren’t forced to choke down tasteless camp rations. But honestly, the food we were eating at present was nothing special compared to the kind of things we had in the Abyss, so I was sort of surprised at Dagan going overboard in his praise of our meal.

“This is actually pretty normal food for us,” I replied with a smile. “If it had been possible, I would have had my people prepare you a feast fit for a king. Unfortunately, I only brought along one maid on this quest, so I apologize for the simpler cuisine.”

“Heck, this is more than I could ever have *dreamed* of!” Dagan said. “Who’d’a thunk I’d be sleeping in an actual cottage and eating fine food like this in the middle of a confounded dungeon quest? The only thing missing is some good alcohol to wash it all down!”

“Blecch! How can anyone drink somethin’ as awful-tasting as alcohol?” Nazuna remarked in the seat next to me, pausing in her meal to scrunch up her face in disgust. “I’d rather stick to fruit juice and sweets, thank ya very much!”

Normally, Nazuna wouldn’t be sitting at the table with me and the dwarves, since she was technically my subordinate and it wasn’t really the done thing, but she’d been hitting it off with the dwarves lately, and I would’ve felt bad about making her wait to eat when she was

hungry, so I said she could join us. As for the other members of my questing team—Mera, Jack, and Suzu—they were eating in a separate room, their meals being served later in order to prioritize our guests of honor.

Dagan cast a quizzical gaze first at Nazuna, then at me. “If I’m hearin’ this young lady right, the alcohol ain’t as tasty as the food where you live?”

“Oh, well...” I began. “I can’t really answer that, since I’ve never had the opportunity to drink alcohol. As for Nazuna, she had some very strong liquor one time by mistake, and she’s hated alcohol ever since.”

For reasons to do with the age of my physical body, I’d never touched a drop of alcohol, so I had no idea about the quality of the liquor the Unlimited Gacha produced.

“However, I do know of two people who would definitely know all about our alcohol, and as it happens, I’ve brought them along on this quest,” I continued. “You could ask them, if you like.”

Dagan leaned forward in his chair in excitement, as did his two associates. “Oh!” the dwarf king exclaimed. “Yes, please send them in!”

I’d heard that dwarves loved to drink, and Dagan definitely appeared to fit the mold. I asked Mei to fetch Jack and Mera once they were done eating. Those two frequently bought alcohol at the dungeon store, so I figured they would be the perfect people to answer Dagan’s questions. Though unfortunately, it didn’t end at just a few questions.

“You wanna know all about our booze, huh?” Jack said. “If that’s a fact, there ain’t no better teacher than hittin’ the sauce, my good brahs.”

“Keh heh heh heh! You do have a way with words, Jack,” Mera crowed. She and Jack had joined us in the dining room to hear the dwarves’ queries, and once the king and his crew had finished putting their questions to the pair, they both activated their Item Boxes and pulled out enough bottles of liquor to cover the whole table.

“Whoa! I’ve never seen drinks like these in my life!” Dagan marveled.

“Some of these bottles are so fancy, they should be in a museum!” one of Dagan’s associates remarked.

“Is this one supposed to be liquor?” asked the second dwarf deputy. “It looks darn near clear enough to be water.”

While the dwarfs excitedly inspected the selection, Nazuna pinched her nose at the sight of the bottles, backed away from the table, then ran full speed out into the hallway. It appeared she was still traumatized from that messy episode with the strong liquor.

With a beefy grin splashed across his face, Jack plucked one particular bottle from the bunch and filled the dwarves' glasses. "Bottoms up, my dudes. You'd better believe this one's top-shelf stuff, so prepare to have your minds blown!"

"That clearwater alcohol you're looking at there just happens to be my personal fave," Mera said. "It's made from distilled rice, and it has a mellow flavor that makes it slip smoothly down your throat."

Dagan took a sip of the liquor Jack had poured for him, then grunted with pleasure. "This amber spirit's richer'n any of the hooch we make in our kingdom. And it's got a fantastic aroma to boot! I dunno how you folks are able to brew up this sweet nectar!"

"This clear liquor's a mighty good sip too!" Dagan's associate remarked. "And it goes down easier than water!"

I wasn't able to follow this conversation about alcohol at all, and I didn't want to get in the way of what was building up to be a festive atmosphere, so I excused myself and headed back to my own cottage. The other non-drinkers in the group—Mei, Nazuna, and Suzu—decided to leave with me.

"I still can't believe they actually *like* drinking that disgusting stuff!" Nazuna said, holding my hand as we strolled back to our cottage. She looked positively baffled by the idea that anyone could ever develop a taste for alcoholic drinks.

"I do hope Jack and Mera will not forget their night watch rotations," said Mei, who was walking a few paces behind me and Nazuna.

"If they *do* forget, we can always take their place," Lock said, and Suzu nodded earnestly.

I'm not saying I agree with Nazuna, but I do have to wonder if alcohol is really delicious enough to make a hobby out of drinking it, I thought. I wasn't about to have my first drink while we were in the middle of exploring these ruins, but I did make a mental note to at least try some liquor on my return to the Abyss.



When we visited the dwarves' cottage the next morning, we found the king and his two deputies splayed out on the floor and groaning due to their bad hangovers. If I were to hazard a guess at how they had gotten into this state, I would suggest they had found the strong liquor from the Abyss so pleasing to their taste buds, they were unable to control themselves and had guzzled down the drinks all night long. Mera and Jack—who had drunk the dwarves under the table—had managed to remain alert and sober thanks to their elevated power levels.

"I will acknowledge your professionalism in keeping to your night

watch rotations,” Mei said, launching into a lengthy lecture. “But I really must question your judgment when you have allowed our guests to drink themselves to the point of being ill. You even took turns binge drinking while the other departed to complete their night watch assignment. Your duty is to safeguard the royal delegation as we explore these ruins, and we are about to descend into what would appear to be a highly dangerous tier. So please explain to me how allowing your charges to develop hangovers in any way helps to protect them from danger.”

Mera chuckled nervously. “Oh, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Naw, this one’s on me,” Jack said. “I got so super stoked hearing how my dwarf bros were fans of my special stash, I got carried away and lost track of time.”

Personally, I didn’t blame Jack and Mera for wanting to spend as much time as they could with their new drinking buddies. After all, it wasn’t every day you met like-minded people who love what you love. *Besides, we have gacha cards that can cure hangovers and sleep deprivation*, I thought.

Even though I didn’t think what had happened was all that big a deal, Mei continued to give Jack and Mera a dressing down, and the verbal reprimand was so fierce, it even caused Suzu to shrink back, even though she wasn’t in any sort of trouble. Meanwhile, Nazuna looked down with renewed terror at the incapacitated dwarves, who were mumbling away like zombies on the floor of the living room.

“No way am I *ever* touchin’ alcohol again!” Nazuna declared to no one in particular. “Nosirree! It’s just sweets and juice for me!”

Nazuna’s voice was apparently too much for the hungover dwarves, because they started groaning even louder.

“As is clearly observable, this is not setting a very good example for Nazuna,” Mei pointed out to Jack and Mera.

All I could do was chuckle awkwardly at the whole messed-up situation.



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Backstabbed in a Backwater Dungeon: My Trusted Companions
Tried to Kill Me, But Thanks to the Gift of an Unlimited Gacha I Got
LVL 9999 Friends and Am Out For Revenge on My Former Party
Members and the World Volume 5
by Meikyou Shisui

Translated by Gad Onyeneho
Edited by SMR

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